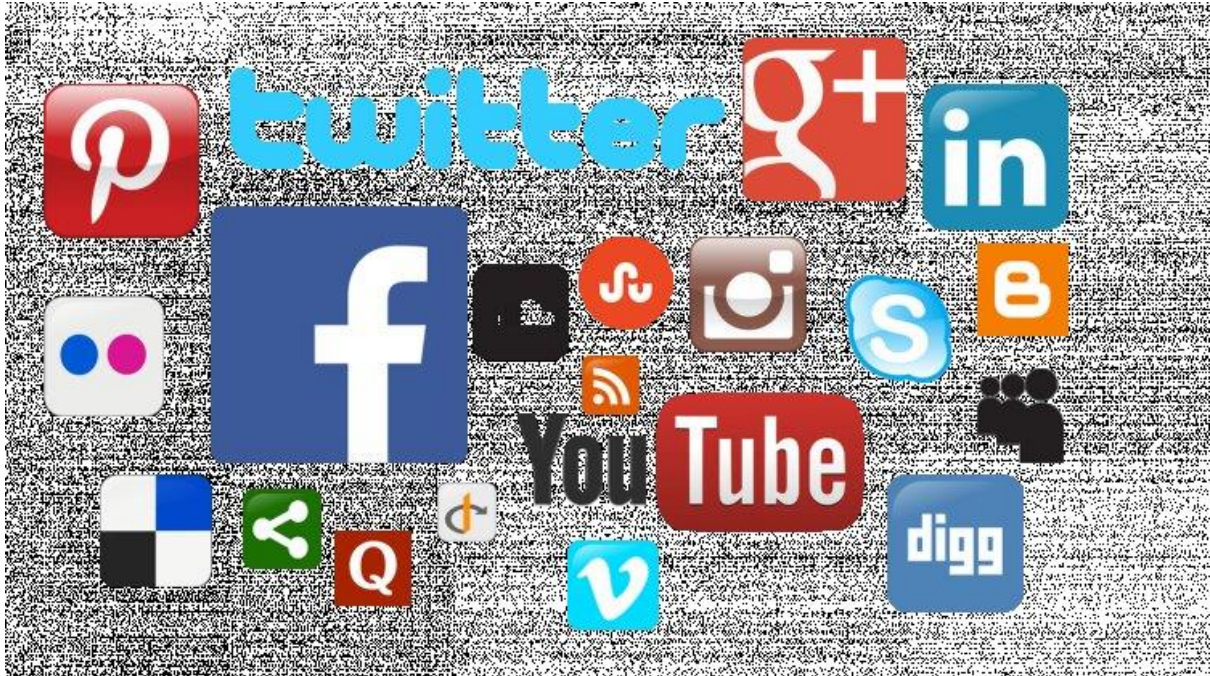


Destination Branding Through Social Media Influencers in Nepal.



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Abstract

The increase of internet and social networking sites have changed the mode of communication. Further, advances in mobile technology have made social media more accessible, allowing direct contact between social media influencers (SMIs) and their audiences. Social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, TripAdvisor, YouTube, and Twitter have taken the marketing and promotion of touristic destinations to a new level. A knowledge gap exists regarding the more profound impact of online information on tourists' feelings and intentions. In this regard, this passage emphasizes the need for more comprehensive research to fully understand the importance of social media influencers (SMIs) in shaping tourist intentions and perceptions in the case of Nepal.

The study explores how social media influencers use social media platforms to brand and promote destinations. Further, it aims to investigate the usage of social media scenarios and the changes brought about through it through Social Media Influencers (SMIs) in Nepal.

A qualitative research method was applied to the study. In addition, the inductive approach guided the study in gathering data and analyzing it to recognize patterns and themes. A semi-structured interview was conducted with five popular SMIs in Nepal for data collection. The study's findings indicate that SMIs have fostered destination branding of unexplored destinations by contesting the stereotypes of people, culture, and tradition narratives. Further, the democratization of SMIs has played a crucial role in bringing forward the narratives of local people through the mediatory role of the SMIs.

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In Copenhagen,
17th June 2024

Bikash Timilsena
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List of Abbreviations

E-WOM- Electronic Word of Mouth

ICT- Information Communication Technology

DMOs- Destination Management Organizations

NTB- Nepal Tourism Board

SMLs- Social Media Influencers

SNS- Social Networking Sites

UGC- User Generated- Content

WOM- Word of mouth

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Background of the Study

The increase of internet and social networking sites has changed the mode of communication; further, advances in mobile technology have made social media easier to access, allowing direct contact between the social media influencers (SMIs) and their audience (Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Statistics, 2022). Social networking sites like Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, LinkedIn, TripAdvisor, YouTube, and Twitter have taken the marketing and promotion of tourist destinations to a new level. Therefore, it is common to see different tourist departments related to the destination operating through social media platforms (Sthapit & Khadka, 2016).

Tourism contributes significantly to Nepal's GDP (MoFE, 2018). The inflow of tourists in Nepal increased by 4,728 tourists in the year 2023 in comparison to 2022, and the aim is to double the figure by the year 2024. Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) data highlighted that one million tourists visited Nepal in 2023; the highest flow of tourists was from India, China, and the USA, respectively. The tourism industry currently accounts for a 6.7 percent contribution to the GDP of Nepal (World Bank, 2024). Social media and networking sites such as Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, Twitter, and TikTok, popular for sharing information (Javed et al., 2020) about destination images and tour information by influencers, have influenced the behaviors of tourists tremendously (Khan et al., 2022). The information on social media and digital marketing has influenced travel decisions for tourists, and the sharing of experiences about destinations to help other tourists make plans for the trip (Islam, 2021; Khan et al., 2021).

Social media has changed our lives in every aspect, including the way we seek information about tourist destinations we dream of visiting. The content from popular social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, Facebook, and YouTube have made choosing a destination simpler and more convenient. Moreover, the influence of TikTok, YouTube, Facebook, and Instagram have changed the way people search, explore, and share their experiences for others to cherish. The Corona phase also saw how social media influencers encouraged and changed the scenario of tourism in Nepal.

Recent research highlights the considerable influence of social media platforms like Instagram, YouTube, and Facebook on tourist behavior (Javed et al., 2020; Khan et al., 2022). These platforms have become hubs for sharing travel experiences, destination photos, and tour information. This digital landscape has fundamentally changed how tourists make travel decisions (Islam, 2021; Khan et al., 2021). Tourists not only rely on social media to plan their trips, but they also actively contribute by sharing their own experiences, creating a valuable resource for fellow travelers. Pantano et al. (2019) advocated for further analysis of the impact of online information on tourist's intentions and perceptions, as only limited studies have been conducted. (Deb, Nafi, and Valeri, 2002; and Pektas and Hassan, 2020) also point out that user-generated content (UGC) and tourists' behavioral intentions have not been explored adequately.

Furthermore, a knowledge gap exists about the deeper impact of online information on tourist perceptions and intentions (Pantano et al., 2019). While some studies have explored this connection (Deb et al., 2002; Pektas & Hassan, 2020), the influence of user-generated content (UGC) on tourist behavior requires further investigation (Garcia-Milon et al., 2020). Research has primarily focused on Western tourists' experiences with digital marketing, neglecting the perspectives of non-Western travelers (Garcia-Milon et al., 2020). In this regard, this passage emphasizes the need for more comprehensive research to fully understand the importance of social media influencers (SMIs) in shaping tourist intentions and perceptions in the case of Nepal. It highlights the significance of exploring user-generated content and its impact on tourist behavior, along with broadening the scope of studies to include non-Western tourist experiences.

In this study, we aim to explore how social media influencers are using social media platforms to brand and promote destinations. Nepal aims to be the premier destination, highlighting its unique attributes by promoting sustainable tourism at both national and international levels (Republica Nepal, 21 March 2024).

1.2. Tourism Statistics of Nepal

Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) confirmed the arrival of 90,211 international tourists in May 2024. The tourist season usually begins in February and is the highest in March and April. The government of Nepal has planned to welcome two million international tourists in 2024. The tourism industry has seen an increase of 12.8 percent in tourist arrivals compared to 2023 (Kathmandu Post, 2024). According to Nepal Rastra Bank data, the tourism industry employs 20 percent of the population and contributes roughly 3 percent to the GDP (NiPoRe, 2024).

The appeal of Nepal as a tourist destination is truly global, as evidenced by the diverse range of countries from which tourists visit. In March 2024, India, the United States of America, the United Kingdom, Sri Lanka, Germany, Thailand, Australia, France, and Myanmar were the top ten countries sending tourists to Nepal. These statistics, compiled by the Invest Board of Nepal, also reveal the varied reasons for visiting Nepal, with 62.5 percent of tourists coming for pleasure, 15.2 percent for trekking & mountaineering, 13.1 percent for pilgrimage, and 9.2 percent for other purposes.

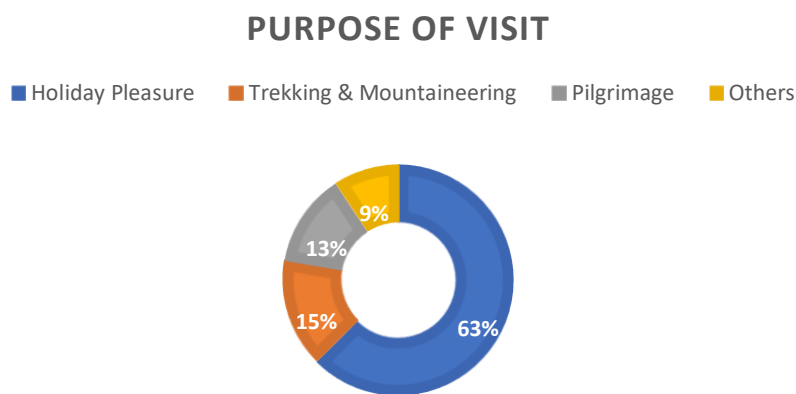


Figure 1: Purpose of Visit

(Source: Nepal Tourism Statistics, 2023)

Despite the exponential increase in tourist arrivals, the average length of stay decreased by 15.5 percent, possibly because of travel concerns or preferences for shorter trips. The number of male visitors increased, and the visitors between the 31-45 age bracket saw a remarkable increase.

Statistics of Tourists Arrival by Year & Country

Year	Tourists Arrival
2020	230,085
2021	150,962
2022	614,869
2023	1,014,885

Year	Tourists by Country (in percentage)
India	21.2%
China	14.2%
USA	7.8%
UK	5.1%
Sri Lanka	4.7%
Thailand	3.5%
Others	43.6%

Table 1: Tourist Arrival Data by Year and Country

Source: NTB (2023)

1.3. Institutionalization of Tourism in Nepal

Nepal's tourism sector is a complex network of organizations and stakeholders working collaboratively to promote the country as a premier travel destination. At the heart of this network lies the Tourism Department of Nepal, responsible for registering and overseeing the nearly 5,000 tourism service providers operating within the country (Batala et al., 2019). These providers offer a wide range of services, catering to the diverse interests of tourists seeking adventure, cultural immersion, or relaxation. Among these service providers, tours, trekking, and accommodation services are the most popular, reflecting the allure of Nepal's natural beauty and rich cultural heritage. In addition to these commercial entities, Nepal's tourism landscape is enriched by numerous independent and non-profit organizations dedicated to advancing the industry's interests. The Hotel Association of Nepal (HAN) plays a crucial role in ensuring the quality of hotel services in the country. The Nepalese Association of Tour and Travel Agents (NATTA) advocates for the interests of travel agencies and promotes ethical tourism practices. The Trekking Agents Association of Nepal (TAAN) focuses on the trekking sector, ensuring the safety and well-being of trekkers. These organizations, along with the Tourism Department of Nepal, contribute significantly to developing and promoting Nepal's tourism sector (ibid).

While the collective efforts of various organizations shape the tourism industry, the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) stands as the beacon of Nepal's tourism sector. As the primary governmental representative, operating under the Ministry of Culture, Tourism, and Civil Aviation (MoCTCA), the NTB is entrusted with the pivotal task of promoting Nepal as a global tourist destination (TIA, 2014). Its responsibilities span from strategic marketing campaigns to active participation in international tourism fairs, and from fostering collaborations with foreign travel agencies to attract tourists to Nepal.

Moreover, the NTB is not just a promoter of Nepal's tourism but also a guardian of its natural and cultural heritage. It actively engages with local tourism stakeholders, forging partnerships that ensure the industry's sustainable development. This includes collaborating closely with local communities to develop tourism products that benefit visitors and residents while preserving Nepal's natural and cultural heritage. The

NTB's efforts are instrumental in maintaining the delicate balance between promoting tourism growth and safeguarding the country's unique identity.

Nepal's tourism sector is a dynamic and multifaceted landscape, comprised of diverse organizations and stakeholders working in concert to promote the country's tourism potential. Its unique blend of adventure, culture, and spirituality sets Nepal's tourism sector apart. The Tourism Department of Nepal, service providers, independent and non-profit organizations, and the Nepal Tourism Board all play integral roles in shaping the industry's development. Their collective efforts ensure that Nepal remains a captivating destination for tourists worldwide while preserving its rich cultural heritage and natural beauty for future generations.

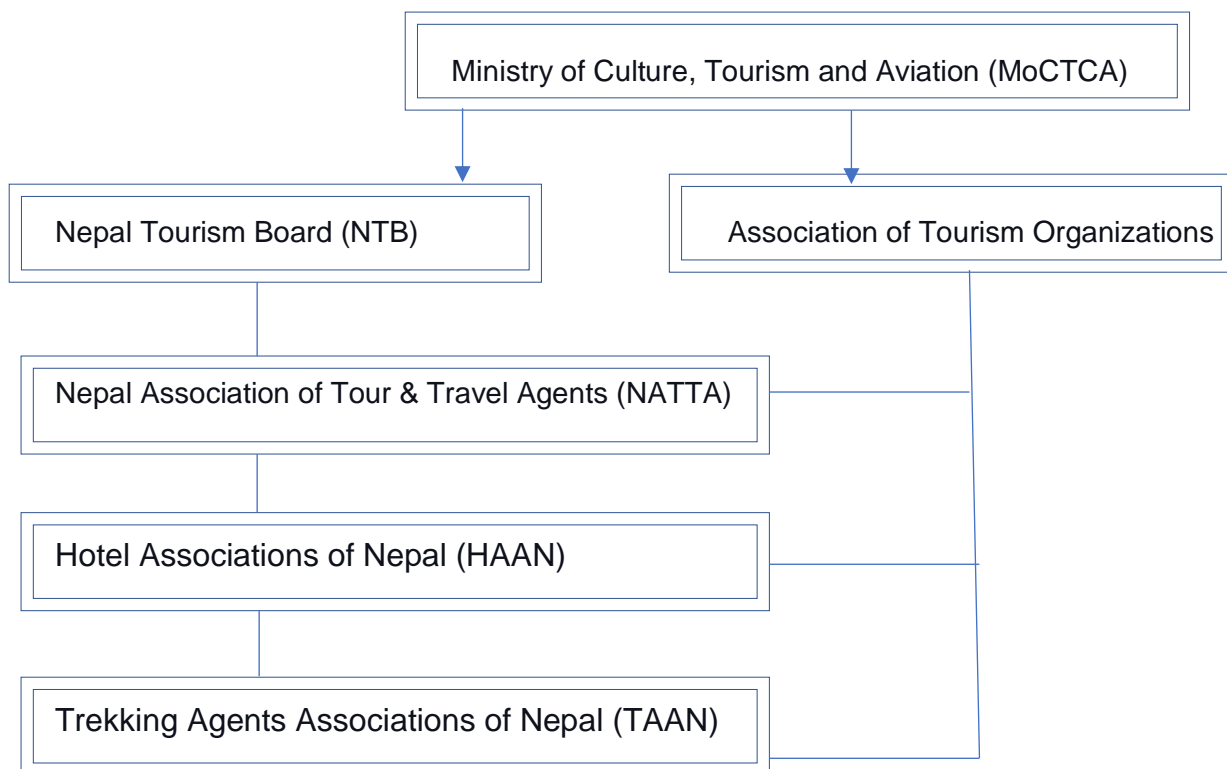


Figure 2: Institutionalization of Tourism in Nepal

Source: Nepal Tourism Board (2023)

Major Tourist Attractions

Nepal's allure lies in its majestic mountain peaks and many outdoor activities. But it's not just about adventure. Nepal also boasts a rich cultural heritage, a blend of Hindu, Buddhist, and Prakrit traditions, with two of its four World Heritage Sites dedicated to culture. The country offers diverse activities, from rafting, kayaking, and canyoning to bird watching, hot air ballooning, bungee jumping, paragliding, mountain biking, and rock climbing. This unique blend of natural and cultural attractions makes Nepal a compelling destination for all types of tourists.

Depending on the place and geography of Nepal, various tourism-based activities are available. The most popular are active tourism, cultural tourism, religious tourism, ecotourism, sports tourism, and business tourism (Pradhan, 2013). Trekking tourism

is essential and popular due to Nepal's vast and different geographical areas. A short hike to Pun Hill and a hiking route to the Annapurna Base Camp are popular among foreign visitors. Further, collecting various fauna and flora species also attracts avid plant and animal lovers to Nepal. Of all, community-based tourism in Nepal is still in the early phase and is an essential and vital aspect of Nepal's tourism. As the voices of local communities often go unheard, it is vital to make the local residents self-sufficient and an integral part of the destination promotion and branding in the long run. Therefore, the roles of SMIs in integrating the grassroots people through their culture, traditions and promoting destinations is crucial. In the context of Nepal, it is vital for both the DMOs and the local people.

1.4. Motivation and problem formulation

The motivation behind the research is that few studies have been conducted about social media and tourism in Nepal, and very few have been conducted on destination branding through social media influencers. The growth of social media in tourism has exponentially reached beyond geographical borders, and its contribution to developing the tourism industry is immense. Social media acts as a platform for branding, marketing, and communicating services to tourists in decision-making processes when selecting destinations. In the context of Nepal, it is a gateway to many popular tourist destinations, as it offers numerous natural and cultural attractions, trekking, and other adventure activities (NTB, 2008; Thapa, 2010). In addition, the number of social media users in Nepal reached 13 million in 2023, which accounts for 41 percent of the total population of Nepal (Data Reports, 2024). The other reason for the research is the decreased use of travel intermediaries because of social media platforms. Social media has allowed potential visitors to plan their trips without travel intermediaries but from direct providers (Para-Lopez et al., 2012; Griffiths, 2014).

Over the years, endorsement of products and services by celebrities and social media influencers (SMIs) has been a game changer in terms of marketing communication of destinations (ibid). Research has pointed out that influencers add value to products or services and the tourism destination (29). A survey by Digital Marketing Institute (2019) highlighted that recommendations by influencers further influenced 50 percent of the decision-making; 40 percent of social media users bought products or services

promoted by influencers through Instagram pages and YouTube videos (19). Tourism destinations and business organizations have identified the influence and potential of influencer marketing as word-of-mouth. The influencers of social media act as trusted channels for target audiences to convey the message of brands to convince new audiences (Baker, 2019; Hughes et al., 2019). According to Hoos (2019), influencer marketing allows communicating with audiences who trust and are convinced of the narratives of the influencers. Unlike general products and services, the buying process is longer as the influencers' audiences tend to pass through various channels or points before reaching the featured destination (Travel Mindset, 2020).

In conclusion, this research aims to delve into the strategies employed by social media influencers in communicating the branding of destinations in Nepal and their role in promoting these destinations. The central research question that this study seeks to answer is:

“How are social media influencers branding destinations using their platforms to promote Nepal as a tourism destination?”

Further, to answer our main research question, the following sub-questions have been considered:

- To identify how social media influencers are branding and promoting tourism in Nepal.
- To examine current practices of social media in Nepalese tourism.
- To investigate changes in the tourism industry due to social media and social media influencers in Nepal.

The master thesis is structured into seven chapters. The brief introduction and the literature review will support the study's research and provide background knowledge on specific topics. The study explores theories on destination branding, social branding, and marketing theories, and the role of social media and the social media

influencers and so forth in general. The methods section demonstrates the use of practical research tools such as interviews and questionnaires. In the analysis section, the findings of these interviews and questionnaires are meticulously presented and rigorously linked to the research. The thesis concludes with a thorough discussion of the results and the provision of probable recommendations applicable to other destination brands. A conclusion at the end succinctly summarizes the main findings, underlining the thoroughness of the analysis.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

2.1 Tourism and Social Media

The evolution of technologies and their role in social and economic themes in social science studies are meaningful for society (Ellion, 2007). Researchers have found that technological development has strengthened ties between social-cultural structures and individual agencies. The crucial role of ICT in economic development, communicative actions, social relations, and business methods is a footstep of rising tourism activities and their trajectories (ibid).

In this digital age, the landscape of tourism has undergone a profound transformation, primarily influenced by the heavy presence of social media (Kietzmann et al, 2011). It also suggests that this era of social media has not only been seen as a broadcasting medium to participatory platforms, but it has also acted as “Front Media” for collaborating and sharing information. Therefore, (Li & Wang, 2011) supports writing that social media have recharged the industry to expand exponentially along with the customers (travelers) increasingly turning to online platforms to plan, share, and reminisce about their journeys and the intersection of tourism and social media has become a powerful force shaping the way we explore the world. Thus, these mediums or channels in social media have been discovered as inspiring and interactive technologies as they facilitate trip planning and sharing of information, interests, ideas, and content distributors (ibid).

Consequently, Rathony (2013) cites Universal Mcnann (2008) and presents that there are hundreds of platforms for internet users to share information and interact about destinations. However, the following platforms are the major social media sources of information for users.



Figure 3: Key Social Platforms

Source: (Rathony, 2013) cites from Universal Macnann, 2008)

In addition, (Koumelis, 2011) said that social media platforms have become virtual travel agents, inspiring wanderlust and facilitating trip planning. With the click of a button, users can explore destinations, discover hidden gems, and connect with like-minded travelers. Instagram, Pinterest, and TikTok have become visual playgrounds for travel enthusiasts, showing stunning landscapes, unique cultures, and mouthwatering cuisines. The hashtag culture on these platforms acts as a compass, guiding users to curate content and fostering a global community of explorers. These activities dominate tourism and touristic activities (Lueng et al., 2013). However (Wang & Fassenmairer, 2004) write in their article that academic scholars do notice that despite the prevalence of social media in the tourism industry, there still are some nudges that concern personal or privacy issues and identity theft in substantial ways.

In this sense, social media and the rising phenomenon of Web 2.0 technologies are practiced as a novel form of value creation through technological structures (Kalpan, 2015). They also appear as assertive communication and information channel tools that help institutions and companies' market and create a brand image in the hospitality industry. These upward trends in "social media tourism" provide a wealth of information on destinations, facilities, traveling, and reviews to visitors (ibid). Interestingly, a report (Macdonald, 2019) proves that 82% of travelers (born between

1997-2012) have conducted deep research about destinations after finding social media content being shared online. Research by Statista (Leisure Travel) exhibits that 36.5% of the population relies on media content posted from holiday experiences and hashtag trends (ibid). Social media platforms have become influential despite some concerns about the reliability and legitimacy of shared information.

Ever since the invention of the internet and its extensive practice worldwide, the tourism industry has geared up to benefit (networking and communicating) in terms of destination credibility, customer sentiments, information sharing, and even e-word of mouth(ads) (Zivkovic et al., 2014). Apart from this, social media platforms for the last 20 years have added value to the research areas in the tourism and hospitality sectors (Ellion, 2007). Tourism and social media align in informative and experimental activities. The tourism industry still perceives word of mouth (WOM) as more trustworthy than other platforms. However, (Zivkovic et al., 2014) evolution of the electronic world of mouth (E-WOM) has been a more asymmetric form of information sharing. E-WOM reveals the visual content that influences consumers more than other media sites. Nevertheless, visuals could sometimes be unreal since somebody may post them with the aim of commercial benefits or even personal stake.

Many states use social media as primary sources for strategic marketing, supporting destinations, and reaching out to their potential target groups. For instance, Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube reflect how organizations utilize media resources. Tourism practitioners promote their products and implement policies through extensive technology usage. There is a debate on managing social media and User Generative Content (UGC); some advocate UGC as a platform for better destination visibility, more impact, and a better source of the latest, incomparable, differentiated, and even sometimes related information. Other scholars cite that UGC is a new source of information for market research and internal and external environmental analyses. Therefore, the trust and sole dependency on UGC for content analysis and analytic strategy is in doubt.

Since trust is an essential driver in this industry, UGC's provision of diversified information may change the visualization of the services from the customer's point of view. However, the role of social media at distinct stages of traveler's travel planning

has been supported by social media platforms and other technological platforms in the last few years. Even researchers have acknowledged that media outlets play a crucial roleplay in tourists deciding and planning their trip. Companies seek a marketing opportunity for their products and attempt to explore consumer satisfaction and purchasing products from suppliers' perspectives using social media platforms.

Social media from the supplier's perspective

Given the emergence and advent of social media and its popularity among consumers, traditional marketing and promotion strategies are no longer adequate for business firms. With the growing number of users and groups in Information and Communication Technology (ICT), research has suggested that social media has become a prominent form of influencing consumers while making the buying decision. With this, (Kotler et al., 2006, p. 30) state that "social media plays a decisive role for the destination reputation and a social and managerial process by which individuals and groups obtain what customers need and want."

The strategic use of social media in the tourism industry is exemplified by Chinese entrepreneurs who use blogging to shape perceptions of their destinations (Leung et al, 2011). Similarly, management organizations have harnessed social networking sites (SNSs) to provide credible information on various fields of interest, such as events, food, attractions, and entertainment. This strategic use of internet technologies, as (Gohil, 2015) suggests, has allowed the tourism industry to connect with consumers in an organized and trustworthy manner, instilling confidence in its effectiveness.

The 'Organizational Social Media Marketing Strategy' is a widely followed approach that outlines several key considerations for organizations to achieve comprehensive results. (Gohil, 2015) suggests that setting clear goals, identifying the target audience, choosing the right platforms, creating engaging content, establishing a content calendar, engaging in discussions with followers, staying updated, collaborating with influencers, demonstrating responsiveness and attentiveness, and adapting business strategy and action plans as needed are all crucial for the sustainability of any supplier.

(Combs,1999) in his research in tourism advocates that social media does not only play a leading role in vibrating the tourism industry, but their proactive monitoring and direct interaction with tourists (prior, during, and after the crises) and action-oriented approaches for crisis communication and management are positive aspects for the industry. 'Crisis effectively navigating skills' refers to the ability of social media to help companies and organizations manage and respond to crises in a timely and effective manner. (Weick, 1995) argues that with the ability to facilitate real-time information and data-driven insights, social networks have empowered an active involvement of local authorities and stakeholders in crisis management with coordinated action plans. This helps not only with identification or mitigation but also with responding to avoid a crisis before it happens. It is a potent tool for crisis effectively navigating skills in the tourism sector. Thus, many companies have developed crisis management information systems and applications, such as E-Team, Alert Technologies, E811, and so forth (Sarcevic et al., 2011). This practice emphasizes an institution's effective ability to spread information to the public to avoid any unfamiliar situation. For instance, (Aktuna & Bahar, 2013) illustrates that during the earthquake in Turkey and Syria, people created 'Safe Check' and 'Ok' on Facebook to inform their families and friends that they were safe. Travelers mostly use mobile phones to turn on social media, while other modes of media still have limited access during times of crisis. Hence, this sort of direct communication on travel advisories, collaboration, and coordination amongst various stakeholders on social media could humanize the crisis response and build trust with customers.

Social Media from the consumer's Perspective

From a consumer's point of view, social media has not only been seen as a communicative tool to stay connected with friends and families but has also been central to business success (Hidayat and Are, 2018). It expands the weight of shaping decisions and setting organizational goals in marketing master plans to grasp the intricacies of consumer behaviors. This multifaceted role influences organizational strategies and focuses on product innovation for sustained growth and relevance. It is now a place where consumers continue to evolve and shape in learning and educating themselves about products and services offered by the companies(ibid). Further,

(Lewis & Bridger, 2001) write that this array of content consumption fosters relationships between marketers and retailers along with brands and trends. Consumers believe this forward-thinking approach positions them as thinkers and innovators in digital consumer behavior (ibid). They assess that in today's mobile world, social networking sites are not only consumed for traveling information but are also operated with a theme of providing interpretation during a journey and helping in guiding decisions within the market. Therefore, social media as a hotbed of social activities not only sways the consumer in their product consumption desire but also endorses credibility and quality experiences for a product (Wei, 2015). Some general practices of study express that visitors consume content and share their travel content of fantasies, nostalgia, and exotic destinations. Such sharing of raw and authentic content improvises positive remarks and benefits for future visitors' physiological evaluation of a destination. This process of sharing and capturing images with the use of social media and its outlets (Balomenou & Garrod, 2019) research manifests as a "Circle of Representation" in tourism studies, and perceived images by an individual could inspire to travel to distant places (Jenkins, 2003).

Another noteworthy trend in social media by users is to draw attention to some issues and organize and protest digitally. Moreover, it has become apparent that actions taken online as social media activism have more significant impacts than offline actions. In other words, digital activism movements have larger scales of effects than traditional activism movements. For example, carrotmob.org uses social media platforms to organize local consumers in actions and their movements on YouTube, including coffee shops and groceries, and convince market suggests that digital technology has found a new way to influence people around them. Another instance that fueled the power of digital anti-brand activism was the movement in the US, boycotting companies and stores that carry Donald Trump-affiliated items, as well as her daughter's shoe line. This protest did not only boycott clothing stores but also ignored many TV shows in America. Hence, from the consumer perspective, social media acts like whistleblowing as they expose issues, suppression and illegal practices, negative brand values, and negative images of a product.

Nevertheless, researchers have found different approaches to activism: optimistic and pessimistic. Benkler (2006) believes that the optimistic approach does help alter existing power and monopolies in the market or political hierarchies. In contrast, the pessimistic approach (Morozov, 2010) considers that digital platforms are used to assert illegal authority and encourage mayhem(chaos).

2.3 Key Social Media Platforms

Kaplan & Haenlein (2010) defines social media as "a group of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content". Social media has not just become an essential part of contemporary businesses, but it has also empowered interaction between the end-users and the business itself. This empowerment is particularly significant in tourism, where social media has been found to ease interaction among tourists and destination suppliers (Janavi et al., 2021; Guha et al., 2018). This empowerment opens up possibilities for travelers and tourism departments to share, communicate, and construct traveling experiences through proper social media channels, thereby, highlighting the importance of user-generated content in destination management organizations. Studies on social media tourism have pointed out positive roles in tourism development through social media. Dellarocas (2003) advocates that social media provides tourism companies with numerous opportunities to understand and respond to consumer preferences.

In addition, Lee and Wicks (2010) state that social media is essential in marketing and promoting tourist destinations. As per the data, recent research on social media usage in Nepal depicted Facebook as the leader, with a total of 9,857,000 users (about half the population of New York) registered, 32.6 percent of the entire population. Other platforms like YouTube, which had 3,800,000 users (about twice the population of New Mexico), followed by Twitter with 2.3 million users (about twice the population of New Hampshire), Instagram with 1.3 million users (about the population of New Hampshire), Pinterest with half a million users and LinkedIn also with half a million users. A global tourism industry statistic pointed out that the impact of social media is higher for younger generations. It estimated that Generation Z was influenced by social platforms, 46 percent by Instagram, and 50 percent by Facebook to make travel

decisions. This influence of social media on traveler behavior is a clear indication of its impact on the tourism industry. Moreover, 51 percent of the travel decisions were the result of Facebook interactions. According to Kemp (2020), 10 million people (about half the population of New York) are actively connected to networking sites. Further, Sthapit & Khadka (2016) found out in their research that the increasing number of visitors and customers each year was because of the increase in the use of social media such as Facebook, Google+, and YouTube.

Undoubtedly, social media platforms have become indispensable for tourism marketing (Tjoe, 2022). The advent of social media has not just influenced but revolutionized the tourism industry (Matloka & Buhalis, 2010), a fact that numerous scholars have underscored. This transformative power of social media in the tourism industry is a fascinating aspect that can enlighten our understanding of the industry's evolution. A study in the travel and tourism sector by Hamill et al. (2008) identified three categories of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs): 'Non-Starters', DMOs with limited/absence of social media; 'Cautious Adopters,' DMOs that had basic representation in social media but limited progress, and finally, 'Progressive Adopters', DMOs that encouraged interaction and emphasized on user-generated content (USG) on their official websites. In recent years, the popularity of the use of social platforms has skyrocketed. The key social media platforms are as follows

Social Networking sites (SNS)

Shen et al. (2015) define Social Networking sites as platforms that facilitate the integration of various social network applications to construct social relationships via online social activities. The sheer magnitude of this influence is staggering, with a 2020 survey revealing that a whopping 3.6 billion people use social networking sites globally. This number is projected to grow to 4.41 billion by 2025, which would account for 53 percent of the world population. These statistics underscore the transformative power of social media platforms in shaping tourism and destination marketing strategies, a fact that should leave our audience enlightened about the topic.

Social Networking sites serve as a platform for tourists to share and communicate their subjective experiences about the details of the destination, through photographs, short

videos, and texts (Kang & Schuett, 2013). An empirical study found that content created by the DMOs needed to be more in comparison to individual/influencer-generated content. This shift in content creation and consumption underscores the pivotal role of individual and influencer content in shaping the destination image, in addition to the traditional role of tourist departments or DMOs (Shen et al., 2015). By emphasizing this, we make our audience feel the significance of their contributions in shaping the destination image.

Image and Media-sharing sites

"A picture is worth a thousand words," as described by Hanan and Putit (2013), indeed speaks more volumes than mere words. The introduction and development of image and video-sharing social media platforms has revolutionized how information is organized and displayed (ibid). Visual content such as images, illustrations, GIFs, and infographics have gained popularity and have a distinct advantage in visual-online marketing. The destinations' travel experience is shared and diffused through textual and visual content by the users in Social Networking sites (Munar and Jacobsen, 2014). This underscores the impact of visual content on user engagement and destination branding, further emphasizing the effectiveness of visual-online marketing.

According to Beeton (2004), visual content sharing is viral among tourists compared to narrative storytelling with texts or blogs, as content with photographs or videos shared on social media creates a community-related motivation. Further, Edensor (2000) poses that photo sharing creates with the destinations, cultures, and with other tourists as well. Video-based social media networks and applications have allowed traditional businesses to embrace new ways of marketing. According to Lindquist (2020), video sharing is 1,200 percent more than text-based content and links, and it allows access to online networks to gain valuable information about the visited destinations (Pan et al., 2007). It has been found that social media users are more convinced by user-generated content from peers and influencers than official content from tourism departments or commercial suppliers. Researchers have argued that video content is essential for communicating the essence of a destination's brand, both emotionally and experience-wise.

Micro-Blogging (Travelblog)

According to Liu et al. (2016)," Microblogging is a free, real-time, brief messaging service that allows the users to send and receive messages using micro-blogging websites, mobile apps, or other desktop applications. It could be in the form of images, links, infographics, videos, and even audio clips. Such platforms consist of Twitter and Tumblr. Organizations see Twitter as a new medium for reaching out to, interacting with, and understanding the behavior of consumers worldwide. Therefore, its popularity in influence and usage gives both consumers and businesses' services an excellent communication platform (Ross et al., 2009, cited in Stankov et al., 2010).

Blogs are a popular form of user-generated content adopted by DMOs. Kaplan & Haenlein (2010:63) state blogs as "the social media equivalent of personal web pages and can come in many different variations, from personal diaries describing the author's life to summaries of all relevant information in one specific content area." Research has shown that blogs influence travelers' feelings about the destination and brands it through shared experiences and feelings (Anfuso, 2006; Yayli et al., 2011). Further, a study by Volvo (2010) on travel blogs and the decision-making process of potential travelers to a destination found that blogs had an impact as electron word-of-mouth communication. However, he argued that blogs needed a utility tool to influence travelers to visit the destination, which was limited. However, blogs can be a valuable tool to check visitor attitudes toward a destination (Carson, 2007; Schmallegger & Carson, 2008), which can help in positioning a destination to create value and attract future visitors (Woodside et al., 2007).

Review sites (TripAdvisor)

It is one form of social networking site that acts as a medium for the exchange of information for both tourist departments and tourists. The increase in review count on review sites allows for the attraction of new customers. More than 93 percent of consumers purchase through online reviews (Abramyk, 2020). Review sites such as TripAdvisor are popular platforms, and the reviews posted by consumers are taken seriously by both consumers and businesses. It had 702 million reviews of prestigious hotels, 160 million travelers' images, 7 million attractions to 16,000 popular destinations, and 2,600 daily themes (Nick, 2022: Signpost Statistics). The tourist

departments can take valuable information regarding the destination market and brand and develop performance accordingly. Numerous positive and negative reviews can be used to effectively manage the negative reviews through collaboration with travelers to create a positive brand image of the destinations (O'Connor, 2010).

2.4. Usage of Social Media in Nepalese Tourism

The rise of social media and technology has become a force that has changed things in every corner of the world. Hence, the tourism industry in Nepal was also one of the sectors that embraced digital transformation. Since the platforms are viral and contribute to the tourism sector and its successful revamp from economic to social aspects. Social media and networking sites such as Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube are recent popular platforms in Nepalese society (Dhungana, 2018). This evolution in the Nepalese context is not only for getting connected, but it has also proved how decisive it can be regarding marketing, promotion, and consumer perception in business functionalities in the Tourism destination in Nepal (Adhikari, 2017). Tourist places like Pokhara, Kathmandu, Chitwan, and Lumbini have been receiving massive exposure via social media as not only have visitors benefitted, but even the travel intermediaries have been profitable in separate locations for creating job opportunities, creating revenue, and aiding the economic development of a nation (ibid). Further (Shrestha 2016: 98) writes, "Tourism is a very competitive and sensitive sector; thus, good marketing strategy and components are essential to moving the business forward."

Due to the incredible increase in user numbers, Nepalese destinations continue to be a trend in international tourists' radar, and the number keeps increasing each year. Social media, the dominating factor in tourism mobilities, offers information, reviews, travel guides, and various information for travelers, which helps in decision-making for a destination. In addition, the Tourism Board of Nepal has also collaborated with international social media influencers to reach out worldwide to its visitors to promote and present the tourism, business, and competitive partnership program. These social media influencers sometimes hold workshops to help stakeholders learn how to use social media in tourism promotion (Prasain, 2018). This partnership has so far generated considerable interest among social business operators, tours, travel

agents, and even local hoteliers in marketing for all kinds of businesses. Likewise, travel agencies, hotels, lodges, restaurants, and bars are also jumping into using digital platforms, leaving the traditional modes of promotion and marketing strategies behind (Cave, 2016).

Tourism expert Renton de Alwis says to add value to marketing, 'All good marketing begins with the customers and ends with customers. All good tourism marketing, therefore, should begin with the visitors (tourists) and see through to the end that we have met all responsible expectations of that visitor. We must ensure that he or she returns with a positive feeling about Nepal and its people (Shrestha, 2016, p. 99; Alwis, 1997). Nevertheless, despite having some constraints such as internal or external political challenges, economic disparities, and international payment issues for the travelers, the Tourism Board, with its stakeholders, has made some coordinated efforts, involved in private and public partnerships and renewed missions and policies in solidifying destinations position as an alluring global destination. In other words, Nepal has digitalized numerous aspects to revitalize its charm through social media campaigns, advertising products, and building awareness of the culture and food. Thus, digital marketing and the usage of social media influencers and their content for place branding or promotion have been recognized as instrumental marketing hubs for every kind of business practice in the Nepalese context. Therefore, tourism destinations are pushing and adopting digital marketing practices to new heights to interact with audiences and survive in this competitive world (Rimal, 2019).

2.5 Destination Branding

"Destination branding is a relatively new concept, yet all researchers and academicians are on the consensus that it can be branded similarly like any consumer goods and services" (Civelek, 2015), as cited in Ilban (2018:124). However, it is more complicated and difficult than regular products and services (Pike, 2005, p. 259). Unal (2001:207) states that a destination brand is a symbolic structure with a collection of memories related to the destination. Regardless of where the destinations are, the goal is to survive the competition and develop new images to counter the negative image, if they have any, to increase the number of visitors. In addition, according to Blain et al. (2005: 337), destination branding refers to a set of marketing activities that (1) supports the creation of a name, logo, wordmark, or other graphic that quickly

identifies and differentiates a destination; (2)conveys continuously the expectation of memorable travel experience which is unique to the destination; (3) connects the visitor and the destination emotionally; (4) reduces perceived risk and search costs for the consumers.

According to McIntosh et al. (2000)," destination brand refers to name, symbol, logo, word or any graphic that both identifies and differentiates the destination; conveying the promise of a memorable travel experience that is uniquely associated with the destination and also serves to consolidate and reinforce the recollection of pleasurable memories of the destination experience." As Morgan (2022) puts it, a brand affixes the gap between the destinations and the feelings of potential visitors, allowing them to select among various destinations. Destination branding allows visitors to communicate the unique identity of the destinations among its various competitors (Morrison & Anderson, 2002). However, there needs to be a generally accepted definition of destination branding.

The exponential growth and fierce competition in the tourism sector have raised tourists' expectations. Therefore, strategic management of destinations is not just important, it's crucial (Pike, 2009). Beerli and Martin (2004) underscore that destination branding is the key to differentiating a destination from its competitors, as a brand reflects a unique, distinctive, and appealing image to its consumers. Destination branding is driven by three elements, which are the fundamentals of a destination brand: Reputation, Identity, and Perception. Destination branding is about creating value for visitors in a competitive geographical region (Morgan et al., 2004; Wagner & Peters, 2009).

Further, Qu (2011) advocated that destination brands have two functions: identification and differentiation. Destination brands differ depending on the unique meaning and attachment the destination holds in the minds of the individuals (Beerli & Martin, 2004). Therefore, Keller (2008) adds that for the success of any branding, consumers must perceive a difference among various brands in the product category; brands with unique, appealing, and distinctive attributes are irreplaceable.

Brand image is defined by Kolb (2006) as "the perception of the brand in the minds of consumers." As Hankinson (2010) states, most of the emphasis in destination branding literature is on creating and communicating the destination's image. Brand image has also gained popularity in destination branding literature. Therefore, brand image is the summation of beliefs about the product/service bought from various information sources, primarily intangible attributes. It represents the perception of the customers of the product and services. Unlike the brand, brand image ownership does not belong to the brand's owner but lives in the customers' minds. Studies have shown inconsistency in understanding the concept of brand image, as the concept of brand image is interchangeably used for destination identity (Qu et al., 2011).

A "brand image is the expression of all objective knowledge, impressions, prejudice, imaginations, and emotional thoughts an individual or group might have of particular destination" (Lawson & Baud-Bovey, 1977). Further, Della & Micera (2007) advocate that destination image is essential to increase the demand for the destination for potential and actual tourists. They also believe that destinations with high brand identity and brand image and tourists' positive beliefs contribute positively to the destination. Moreover, the destination's image after post-visit also influences the tourists' intent to revisit and how the destination's image is communicated to friends and family (ibid). Thus, a good image with a unique experience is the key to increasing the brand value of the destination (Baker & Cameron, 2008; Cleverdon & Fabricius, 2006). The destination image depends on factors such as earlier experiences, familiarity with the destination, the tourists' geographic origin, social and cultural background, and expectations (Beerli & Martin, 2004b). Familiarity with the destination and earlier experiences with the destination affected tourist's perception of the destination (Ryan & Cave, 2005; Baloglu, 2001).

As Cleverdon & Fabricius (2006) assert, "a destination which has clear, strong, positive and generally accepted associations engenders trust, quality, and integrity, and these qualities provide the producers or service providers with a competitive advantage." Therefore, trust is one of the important attributes that persuade tourists to choose a destination. Hankinson (2009) argues that destination image is not only about communicating the destination image to the visitors but also about making the brand promise a reality. For this, a competitive edge over competitors to deliver a

unique quality experience for tourists is essential (Morgan et al., 2003). In the context of tourism, the local people dimension influences the overall destination image, thus affecting brand loyalty and word-of-mouth promotion of the destination. The encounter with friendly people in a relaxed environment entices a higher level of satisfaction and encourages positive word of mouth, thus increasing brand loyalty. However, the negative one minimizes the chances of revisiting the destination (Cho et al., 2003). Nevertheless, Freire (2007) argues that the people factor plays a vital role in giving a competitive advantage over other destinations when branding a destination. Moreover, in the digital age, the role of social media in shaping destination brand awareness must be balanced, making it a crucial area of research for the tourism and marketing industry.

Brand awareness refers to the reflection of tourists' ability to identify the brand under various circumstances. According to UNWTO (2007), "brand awareness pairs the brand to the purchase cues which creates a positive image and efficiently promote and communicate the brand." Keller (2003) advocates the repetitive exposure of the brand to create positive awareness about the brand. Both media play an essential part in configuring perceptions of destinations in the minds of tourists, thus promoting awareness of the destination (Simonin, 2008). Morgan et al. (2003) emphasize using the Internet with a combination of word of mouth to enhance destination awareness. In the context of tourism, user-generated content and firms-generated content are created, consumed, and distributed about the destinations in social media (Narangajavana et al., 2017), aiding tourists in deciding which destinations to visit (Xiang et al., 2015).

As Barreda et al., 2015 point out, intensity and extent are the measurement parameters in online social networks. The intensity of brand awareness refers to how effortlessly individuals recall a brand through social media. In contrast, the extent of brand awareness, on the other, points to the acquisition and consumption of brand services and products through the usage of social media. In addition, many researchers have favored that content generated via social media has a positive effect on destination brand awareness (Moro & Rita, 2018; Sigala, 2018), and the tourists are influenced to compare different destinations and make the decision to visit it (Kim & Che, 2018; Morosan & Bowen, 2018).

Numerous researchers agree that tourism organizations' adoption of social media gives them a competitive advantage. However, they agree that improper implementation and social media practices could backfire and jeopardize the destination's brand and image (Hays et al., 2013). Shao, Rodriguez, and Gretzel (2012: 96) also raise concerns about the use of social media by DMOs and how it is drowning them. Further, in this context, Trihas et al. (2013) study investigated 325 municipalities using social media for decision-making purposes. The study highlighted that municipalities were 'non-starters' and that the technology needed to be higher (Sigala, 2013). Further, municipalities must develop and adopt destination management systems (DMS) faster.

2.6. The role of Grassroot people in shaping the Destination Image

The way potential tourists view a place, based on their perceptions and impressions, plays a significant role in whether they choose to visit. However, the grassroots people and the local communities are the true architects of this image. Their active involvement and empowerment can significantly enhance the authenticity and appeal of the destination, inspiring a sense of pride and ownership (Gartner, 199)

Local communities contribute to the destination's image through active tourism planning and development involvement. For instance, the local communities organize cultural festivals and events, showcasing their unique traditions and heritage. This ensures the authenticity of tourism products and experiences, which modern travelers highly sought after. This leads to a deeper emotional connection with the destination, favorable responses, and strong intentions to revisit or recommend the place (Bologlu and McCleary, 199)

Moreover, grassroots participation in tourism is not just about shaping the destination's image. It has substantial economic and social benefits. According to the study, it creates jobs, increases income, and improves living standards, fostering a sense of hope and optimism. This involvement also promotes sustainable tourism, preserving natural and cultural resources while ensuring inclusivity and equity in development.

However, the repercussions can be severe if tourism is not managed responsibly. Issues such as the commercialization of culture, exploitation, and marginalization of local communities can emerge, posing a threat to the very fabric of the destination's image. This underscores the pressing need for a community-based tourism approach that places local needs and aspirations at the forefront. By equipping grassroots people with the necessary skills and knowledge through capacity-building initiatives, education, and training, we empower them and unleash their potential to shape the tourism industry and preserve their cultural heritage. This is a powerful testament to the transformative power of grassroots involvement in tourism (Mowforth and Munt, 2009)

Moreover, the relationship between destination image and grassroots people is beneficial and mutually reinforcing. Local communities shape the destination's image, while their involvement ensures authenticity, promotes sustainable development, and fosters positive economic growth. This symbiotic relationship promises to create positive, lasting images that attract tourists and contribute to sustainable economic development (Wang, 199).

2.7. Social Media Influencers (SMIs) as Co-Creators

Social Media Influencers (SMI) in the tourism industry have repositioned their degree of control from a broadcast monologue to a social media dialogue, setting up their roles in the value creation of a destination using firsthand experiences and opinions using social media platforms (Stainton,2022). Significantly, the rise of Web 2.0, a term used to describe the transition from static web pages to dynamic user-generated content and social media platforms, has contributed to the current era of transparency and collaborative creation as SMI and their contents reached out to consumers on the internet and fundamentally altered brand-consumer communication. The rise of social media in this Web 2.0 era (Berthon et al., 2012) democratized media production, shifting power from companies to consumers (the collective). In other words, technology and media have revolutionized business operations, fostering a new era of two-way, easy, and simple communication between brands and their audiences (Sigala, 2009). Crucially, communication now extends beyond brand messaging to encompass consumer-to-consumer interaction. What customers hear about brands

on social media and influencers' direct involvement in different communities holds more significant sway than traditional brand pronouncements (Christodoulides, 2008).

To support this, influencer marketing practices with E-WOM set that this new era of branding ditches the "command and control" mentality, embracing the participatory culture fostered by SMI as they tend to gain trust and credibility to enhance the destination image and place attachment. The democratization of branding prioritizes value co-creation, where SMI and consumers play a more active role in shaping brand identity. This has altered the way of communication from consumers to content creators and evaluators, which indeed have explored a new nexus that "brand is no longer what they tell consumers, rather it is what consumers tell each other about products" (Gensler et al., p.33, 2013). Traditionally, companies were seen as the sole creators of brand value. However, the present research considers that influencers and their persuasive communication with consumers can be seen as SDL (service-dominant logic) as it is believed SDL posits that customers are not merely passive recipients of pre-defined value but rather active participants in its creation throughout their consumption experiences.

With the rise of empowered and informed consumers, value creation has shifted towards a collaborative approach in three dimensions: ability, trustworthiness, and content attractiveness (Gensler et al., p.33, 2013). These factors in modern branding and promotion remain in collaboration amongst the influencers as communicators and users as perceivers or content assessment mentors. Similarly, storytelling is crucial in establishing emotional connections and communicating brand values. Brand narratives co-created between firms and consumers are essential for building brand value. Social media activists have disrupted brands' traditional control over their narratives (Trivedi et al., 2022). Consumers have a significant voice in shaping brand stories on internet sites such as Instagram, TikTok, YouTube, and Facebook. Thus, Consumer-generated content on social media is often perceived as more authentic and trustworthy than traditional marketing messages due to its digital, real-time, and dynamic nature.

Likewise, the Tourism Industry must acknowledge consumers as active participants in defining brand meaning and strive to integrate these diverse narratives into a cohesive

brand story. This fact stresses that SMI-generated stories can strengthen consumer relationships by providing a framework for conversations. These conversations allow consumers to integrate their experiences with the brand narrative, fostering brand meaning and identity co-construction. The service-dominant logic in branding emphasizes integrating consumers and other stakeholders in the value co-creation process. SMI's active roles in research highlight the collective consumer's role in co-creating brand value. Brand value is co-created by sharing information, increasing brand transparency, and providing accessible structures for dialogue between brands and consumers. Additionally, through co-creation, digital influencers can create cultural capital that helps the brand. Notably, destinations as a brand offer a stronger sense of attachment and stability compared to individual consumers who have more casual interactions with the brand (Bandara (2022)

While influencer marketing, branding, and promoting destinations is a hot topic for researchers, there are still critical gaps in our understanding of how effective influencers and influencer marketing are in tourism and social media (Trivedi et al., 2022). Upananda and Bandara (2022) found evidence that influencer marketing can positively influence travel decisions on social media while co-creating and adding value to the products. However, the credibility of the influencer plays a crucial role. Research by Ong et al. (2022) suggests that when social media influencers (SMIs) are perceived as credible, their content resonates more strongly with consumers. Similarly, Ljiljander and Gummerus (2015) and Magno and Cassia (2018) (as cited in Guerreiro et al., 2019) emphasize the importance of influencer credibility for their recommendations to be trusted by their followers. Therefore, SMI conversations facilitate co-constructions in brand identity and meaning to integrate brand value effectively and influence the brand narrative, perceived contents, and messages, which should be authentic, transparent, and positive in destination branding and promotion through social media.

2.8. Social Media & Destination Marketing and Branding

It can be defined as "using social media channels to promote an organization and its products to its end-users (as cited in Gretzel & Yoo, 2014, p. 493)". The goal is to build relationships through open conversations (prompt, promote, and monetize), co-creating value together with the exchange of resources and information (Safko & Brake, 2009), (Mangold & Faulds, 2009), (Vargo & Lusch, 2004). Further, Birch (2011) pointed out that social media marketing is like traditional marketing; however, it differs as to how interactions are channeled "with potential and actual customers." In addition, it argues that social marketing focuses on the 4 R's (Relationship, Return on Engagement, Reach based on Relevance and Reputation), unlike the traditional ones, who strive for the 4 P's (Product, Price, Place, and Promotion) (ibid). For social media marketing to excel, extensive knowledge of social media types and their users, long-term commitment, and continuous commitment through exciting content is vital (Gunelius, 2011). Mahnomen and Runnel (2008) stated that "user motivations, user loyalty, and user participation are the keys to the success of social media. In addition, they advocate that "establishment of social networks, collaborative content creation, and user-centered content and flexible design facilitation is the major factors that contribute to making social media attractive to the users."

In addition, social media allows tourism practitioners to tailor information to the needs of individual tourists, thus addressing their personal needs and preferences to make a move (Matloka & Buhalis, 2010). Milano, Baggio, and Piattelli (2011) advocate that online social networks like Facebook and Twitter positively influence tourism website views; further, the websites had more visits in total. Therefore, social media is fundamentally about participation, sharing, and collaboration with end-users instead of just advertising and selling (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010).

However, as put by (Pike, 2004), destination promotion can be employed in numerous ways, and there is a single standard way of promoting a destination. As a result, social media marketing has become an effective tool to create and support active presence in social media platforms firstly, to increase the market coverage, and, secondly, to have broader audience coverage through enhanced customer engagement, increasing brand awareness and by targeting the relevant ads to the targeted audience

(Tjoe, 2022). According to recent studies, 95 percent of travelers visit websites first to read reviews on the destinations before deciding to visit that destination. Therefore, social media marketing offers opportunities for different tourism channels, such as flights, hotels, and things to do at the destination (ibid).

"Destination marketing and branding is both a process and an outcome" (Pike, 2008). Destination marketing deals with the complexities of destinations and the various stakeholders associated with them. However, the result is the destination's brand or image (Yang & Pizam, 2011). Therefore, proper marketing of the destination requires management by various stakeholders and formulation and management of the destination brand. As a result, destination branding differs from general branding of products and services because of some unique attributes. Destination Marketing Organizations (DMOs) act as a medium for storytelling of the destination as a brand through social media activities to the tourists. Further, Morgan & Pritchard (2004) emphasize that destinations with rich emotional meaning and conversational value have strong brands.

Social media usage in marketing and destination branding has increased exponentially since the introduction of social media on the World Wide Web. Its application has helped DMOs reengineer and implement business models and operations in knowledge management, marketing, networking, and services development (as cited by Pereira et al. (2012) in Sigala, Christou, and Gretzel, 2012). Numerous DMOs have embraced social media to promote their businesses. For instance, Tourism Australia listed themselves on its Facebook page as "things to do," a campaign by Queensland, Australia, emphasized "Social Media for Tourism" where a 'Tourism e-kit' tutorial package was developed for the tourists (as cited by Pereira et al., 2012 in Tourism Australia, 2012; Tourism Queensland, 2012). Similarly, the Slovenian Tourist Board launched the social media platform 'Discover Slovenia (STB, 2012), and the USA and Canada followed the path of applying social media to promote tourism. However, it points out that exposure to social media should be limited, as emphasized by Swiss DMOs (as cited by Pereira et al., 2012 in Milwood, 2013).

Tourism practitioners have effectively utilized social media as a medium to disseminate customized information to individual tourists, thereby addressing their personal needs

and preferences (Matloka & Buhalis, 2010). Valls et al. (2013) also underline the significance of social media as it provides a new medium for online marketing strategy and the establishment of new relationships between companies and end-users, thereby aiding in building customer loyalty (Senders et al., 2013). This highlights the role of social media in fostering customer loyalty, a reassuring aspect of its effectiveness.

Social media has been used at all levels of society. DMOs' usage of social media not only allows them to communicate with target consumers and helps them differentiate and position themselves uniquely. Social media allows interaction between various users and sharing their experiences (Eraqi, 2006). The advances the tourism industry has made due to the advancement of information communication technology are immense, which has led to the development of social networking sites (Facebook et al.). These platforms have been used by various tourist organizations and destinations to market and develop destination brands (Buhalis et al., 2011). However, managing a destination brand requires digital strategies and the right tools to position the destination uniquely compared to other destinations (Kastenholz et al., 2013). In addition, Munro and Richards (2011) advocate that a proper and effective destination branding strategy must address the negative images of the destination. The social media platforms are updated regularly and allow users to interact and share their experiences through posts, comments, pictures, blogs, and videos. Thus, the destination branding process must consider the role and influence of social media (Xiang & Gretze, 2010).

However, many scholars have argued against using social media in marketing and destination management. The online platforms have increased mistrust of traditional marketing activities and negatively impacted traditional mass media's decline (as cited by Pereira et al., (2012) in Fotis, Rossides, and Buhalsi, 2012). In addition, Sigala, Christou, and Gretzel (2012) argued that social media has challenged the traditional concepts of customer service, marketing, and promotional activities within the tourism sector. Researchers also emphasized that the results obtained through the use of social media in tourism marketing differ between companies of different sizes. This is because the number of activities employed by larger companies is more significant

than that of small companies. However, the correlation between companies' size and usage success rate still needs to be determined (Hardesty, 2012; Pesonen, 2011).

2.9. E-WOM & Influencer Marketing

According to (Oliveira et al., 2020), with the emergence of the Internet, E-WOM has become a crucial factor in consumer product evaluation via the Internet as a way of how social media is run for marketing and destination branding purposes. Recent studies have shown that E-WOM significantly influences users when specific posts on brands, locations, products, and services are perceived by users after any positive or negative statement is made by actual, potential, or even former customers. This happens when influencers post content liked, followed, shared, commented, and reviewed. As a result, eWOM can occur in several ways that enable social interactions with potential customers and would be available indefinitely. Influencers know that this indefinite marketing period offers more self-disclosure opportunities since its impact, speed, and interaction are more comprehensive than the traditional WOM (Huertas, 2018).

In the tourism industry, WOM is essential in its various scenarios since it cannot be evaluated before consumption. The content on social media about private opinions and travel experiences is a vital communication strategy for destination branding and its image creation and for integrating marketers' emotional connection with consumers. E-WOM has explored a new horizon for communication through opinions, experiences, and recommendations. Due to this, online information and knowledge sharing of a brand and its image creation leverage credibility, trustworthiness, and authenticity in consumers' minds and understanding.

Lund et al. (2019) write that friends and acquaintances provide more robust and influencing impersonal information on their social media accounts. However, social media influencers and content creators are dominant and persuasive in expressing authentic, solid information since they publish or post better-digitalized content and catchy materials that arouse users' attention. Referring to some popular blogs, Instagram posts, Facebook sharing, YouTube videos, and so forth state that the mode of WOM is already in the control of media influencers or content celebrities because

more approachable and effective communicative marketing and branding strategies have been considered into account while branding and promoting in public domain (Bokunewicz & Shulman, 2017).

Hou (2019) explains that paradox in tourism studies has continuously surged along with products, services, social media usage, influence, and advertising. Various research platforms opine that these forms of social media practices and influence roles through the digital environment attract potential consumers and local people at the grassroots level (ibid). The dynamic of social media in the modern lifestyle has influenced everything from small house chores to the business world in terms of marketing, branding, and even promoting products. Along with the uprising of content creators and digital platforms influencers, the scale of conventional media such as radio, TV, newspaper, and brochures are no longer wished for product sale. The marketing and branding shift has focused on online platforms, which have more waves in collaboration and impact users' perspectives than conventional media outlets (Bosio et al., 2018).

This influencing method is considered a modern strategy for presenting the products in the market or even in people's daily lives, where influencers act as representatives or ambassadors for the brand's circulation. This notion of connectivity (influencers and locals) provides consumers with an authentic taste without overly exaggerating a product (Childers et al., 2019). In return, it helps build trust, positive vibes, and unique integrity between the followers and the content makers. Thus, Big influencers are preferred in marketing and promoting brands in the digital era. To probe more deeply, the following figure suggests influencer marketing and its fastest-growing trends in the digitalized and globalized world.



Figure 4: Development & Marketing Trends

(Source: Odell, 2023)

Further, (Hughes et al., 2019) experience that influencers' communication channels and their masterpiece of work have reckoned them as leaders in deciding, manipulating, fostering, trending, and generating purchasing decisions with immense interest, intention, and recommendation amongst the followers. In other words, they are also understood as social media celebrities who constantly create and publish content and develop and advertise the destination status online. However, (Childers et al., 2019) find in their research that influencers sometimes introduce themselves as passive marketers and target probable consumers in specific locations rather than globally. Truly analyzing, this form of practice is a blended form of old and fresh marketing ideas through paid and unpaid, or even sponsored influences; so, they divide into two groups, namely: micro-influencers (unpaid group) and macro-influencers (paid and hired group). Micro-influencers have about 10,000 or fewer followers and aim to target potential consumers in specific locations rather than reaching globally. They plan to advertise specific brands they like that are authentic and more accessible with higher engagement ratio (Jin et al., 2019). In short, these content makers are unpaid influencers who like to explore new destinations and circulate a message to the audiences. Macro-influencers are those influencers who have more than ten million followers and are hired and paid for by more prominent brands, stores, and departments. These influencers prefer advertising for a proven brand to create brand visibility and awareness within the fanbase. Thus, influencer marketing is becoming innovative with the product prompters' charisma, attitude, and lifestyle through their platform's handles. So, it can be said that through the right

humanist approach, budget, target group, and ability, this mode of social media practice will be more effective in terms of brand image, products, and services in the digital era (Jin et al., 2019).

2.10. Social Media Influencers in Destination Marketing

Numerous scholars emphasize the importance and role of influencers in social media communication, and many literatures of consensus on the idea that direct communication, engagement, and sharing are the three vital pillars of social media in influencing the traveler's feeling on the image formation of the desired destination (Sharmin et al., 2021; Sultan et al., 2021). Vrontis et al. 2021 also voice the importance of social media influencers (SMIs) and their role in imparting information to audiences about products, services, or destinations (Cheung, 2022). The research of social media influencers and the promotion of tourist destinations has been on the surge academically and industry-wise.

Peltier (2018) states that influencer marketing is a newly emerging concept; however, it has become integral to travel brands' marketing. For instance, the 'Visit Australia' campaign, which featured popular travel influencers exploring various destinations in Australia, saw a significant increase in tourist arrivals. Statistics also have shown that the tourism industry is the eighth largest investor in influencer marketing in the business world. Influencer marketing can be enforced by videos, pictures, and blog posts on the influencer's social media handle (PING Helsinki, 2018). As per West (2018), collaboration between the brands and the influencers surpasses product endorsement, it may make up sponsored blogs, reviews on products and giveaways, and many more. Gretzel (2018) also voices the importance of social media influencers in destination marketing, as SMIs can amplify messages and target their audiences accordingly regarding destinations. Influencer marketing has now become a crucial tool for destinations to increase targeted visitors through eWOM in the targeted destinations. Generation Y is the highest group whose consumption decisions are heavily influenced by social media influencers, and most tourism organizations persuade destination marketers to engage with their audiences to promote destinations (Xu and Pratt, 2018).

Prior research has also shown that the targeted audiences of the influencer have a high probability of intention to visit if the self-image of the consumer and the influencer is similar. As a result, the study decided that the higher probability of visitation of the destination is if destination-influencer and the potential targeted audience have good compatibility (Xu and Pratt, 2018). However, it's crucial to consider the ethical implications of influencer marketing. Chan (2022) states using influencers in digital marketing generates significant returns, 11 times more than traditional advertisements. Research has shown brands in collaboration with social media influencers have been able to reach larger audiences with a higher state of interaction and engagement with their followers. Leung et al. (2022) also in unison about the fact that influencers are an effective medium in digital marketing in the present context, as more brands work with influencers to achieve business goals.

According to Oliveira et al. (2020), social media changes the tourism industry in two ways: one while searching for information and recommendations before a trip, and two, while sharing information on social media platforms during and after the trip. In such cases, brand influencers, either internal or external stakeholders, act as communication devices to connect their relation to the destination and the visitors (Fernandez-Cavia et al., 2018). This creates two-way communication between the influencers and the probable visitors to the destination through content sharing, engagement, and participation to prove destination brands and portray a unique brand identity and images of the destination (Lund et al., 2018). Further, Lund et al. 2019 state that the effectiveness of the story-telling technique is used by many for destination branding, which expresses a unique way of expressing the values and feelings of a destination among social media users. Moreover, blog posts by influencers act as a platform for understanding and sharing a tourist's experience of a particular destination (Tsaur et al., 2014). Travel narratives posted by influencers and social media users allow abundant information and descriptions of the destination and, as a result, generate eWOM, which in turn motivates individuals to make travel-related decisions (Akgun et al., 2015).

In recent years, the spending on digital marketing campaigns has increased, and so has the competition for attracting tourists to destinations on online platforms (Rambe, 2017). However, it's important to note that influencer marketing is not without its

challenges. For instance, influencers risk not delivering the expected results or not aligning with the brand's values. Similarly, the changing trend in destination marketers has now opted for social media influencer (SMI) marketing in collaboration with SMIs (Harbin et al., 2020). According to research by El Yaagoubi and Machrafi, 2021 (as cited in Najar et al., 2024), collaboration with influencers increases the chances of attracting new tourists, increasing brand trust, and further making the purchase decision. The content shared by influencers on social media platforms has a higher reach to audiences, and content shared by them is considered more reliable and credible, thus allowing two-way communication and feedback (Shrivastava & Jain, 2022, as cited in Najar et al., 2024). Moreover, earlier studies have also found SMIs to be valuable tools for branding destinations to create awareness and the generation of brand equity (ibid). Likewise, the destination influencers have a direct-to-consumer market strategy, which has eased the hassle of relying on multiple intermediaries. Most importantly, destination influencers, besides promoting events and attractions, bring their audiences' attention to unexplored hidden gems (Rambe, 2017).

2.10. Roles of SMIs

Influencer marketing is a potent tool in the dynamic landscape of tourism and destination branding. Its multifaceted approach uses the persuasive power of influencers, social proof, authentic storytelling, and targeted reach to resonate with specific audiences, foster engagement, and drive travel decisions. However, it's important to consider the potential ethical implications of influencers' roles in marketing, such as the disclosure of sponsored content and the potential for misleading or exaggerated claims. This paper explores influencers' critical dimensions and roles within the context of Tourism promotion, examining their effectiveness in shaping beliefs, building brand loyalty, and reaching niche markets (Mendez & Diaz, 2024).

The Essence of Authentic Storytelling in Tourism

Find that 'authentic storytelling' has appeared as a pivotal strategy in the realm of tourism and destination marketing. 'Authentic storytelling' involves crafting narratives that genuinely reflect the experiences of individuals visiting a particular destination. These stories go beyond mere figures, delving into personal anecdotes, emotions, and

insights that resonate with potential travelers on a deeper level. Unlike traditional marketing, which often relies on polished and idealized portrayals, 'authentic storytelling' embraces imperfections and nuances, making the destination more relatable and appealing. For example, the 'New Zealand-100% Pure' campaign, which focused on sharing real stories of travelers' experiences in the country, saw a significant increase in tourist interest and arrivals (Ristevska & Bogoevska, 2021). Similarly, (Yuan and Lou, 2020) discovered that the effectiveness of 'authentic storytelling' stems from its ability to foster trust and credibility. When travelers hear stories from fellow explorers, they are more likely to believe in the authenticity of the depicted experience. These stories create a sense of anticipation and excitement, encouraging potential visitors to embark on their journeys. Furthermore, 'authentic storytelling' has a lasting impact. Stories tend to linger in the minds of travelers, shaping their beliefs of the destination long after they have returned home (Ibid).

Leveraging Visual Content and Social Proof

Scholars (Fujirawa & Martin, 2023) say that visual content plays a crucial role in destination marketing, as it provides a powerful means of highlighting the aesthetics and allure of a place. High-quality photographs and videos that capture the beauty of landscapes, cultural landmarks, and local experiences can ignite the imagination of potential travelers and evoke a powerful desire to visit (ibid). Visual content can be particularly effective on social media platforms, where images and videos can quickly go viral, reaching a vast audience and generating significant interest. 'Social proof', a term used in influencer marketing, refers to the phenomenon where people assume the actions of others in an attempt to reflect correct behavior for a given situation. In the context of tourism, when influencers share their positive experiences at a destination, it acts as a form of endorsement, reassuring potential travelers and confirming their choices. Moreover, the targeted reach of influencer marketing allows destinations to connect with specific demographics that align with their ideal visitor profile, maximizing the impact of their campaigns (Bakri, 2021).

Building Brand Loyalty and Harnessing the Power of Persuasion

In an era of fleeting attention spans, fostering brand loyalty is a paramount goal for destination marketers. Authentic storytelling and community engagement are vital to

achieving this aim (Batrygina et al., 2024). By creating opportunities for travelers to share their stories and connect, destinations can cultivate a sense of belonging and loyalty among their visitors. This sense of community encourages repeat visits and transforms travelers into brand advocates who actively promote the destination to their friends and family. The persuasive power of influencers and authentic storytelling should not be underestimated (Fujirawa & Martin, 2023). The combination of compelling narratives and social proof can significantly influence the decision-making process of potential travelers. Exposure to a consistent stream of positive stories and endorsements about a destination shapes their feeling of the place. It increases the likelihood of choosing it as their next travel destination. In this way, destination marketers can use the art of persuasion to drive bookings and boost tourism revenue (Bakri, 2021).

Influencers have sparked a revolution in destination branding, leveraging the power of authenticity, visual storytelling, social proof, and targeted reach. Their transformative influence, resonating with specific audiences, fostering engagement, and building lasting relationships, has made them an indispensable tool in the modern tourism landscape. As the digital realm continues to evolve, influencers will undoubtedly play an even more significant role in shaping how we perceive and experience destinations worldwide, enlightening us about the ever-evolving landscape of tourism marketing.

As mentioned above, the SMIs play various roles. Further, they have now become integral parts of the promotion and branding of destinations, working with the DMOs. Our research will also discuss and cover what roles SMIs in Nepal play in branding and promoting destinations and how they are doing it in collaboration with the grassroots people of the destinations.

Earlier Research & Gaps

Numerous studies from various branches of leisure and tourism have strongly emphasized destination branding, as has the influence and potential of social media in destination branding. This section includes existing literature on destination branding and marketing, social media, and influencer marketing in the tourism industry. Further, it aims to show the areas of future research.

The scientific literature on branding and marketing of destinations encompasses many components, such as urban planning and tourism. Regarding tourism literature, destination branding is commonly used instead of place branding. Earlier studies have highlighted destination branding from cities to rural areas (Jong et al., 2018; Catrina, 2016). Prior research has been studied on DMOs and consumers' perspectives. Much research has been conducted on destination branding on social media. Moreover, minimal studies have linked social media and branding of the destination through social media influencers. The phenomenon of digital transformation and the increase in social media use and online content consumption in Nepal have motivated us to research this topic.

According to earlier studies, theories focused more on information processing, sociopsychology, and communication, the central themes for tourism research on social media. Leung et al. (2013) cite that most of the research on social media in tourism and hospitality was related to suppliers' perspectives. On the contrary, it has focused more on consumers' or travelers' perspectives than suppliers. The tourism researchers considered consumers' or travelers' perspectives more relevant to social media studies, such as offline/online travelers' behavior and social media usage, attitudes and behavior intentions, and even more, information search about unexplored or hidden gems/destinations (Chen & Law, 2016; Ukpabi & Karjaluoto, 2017). Although recent studies have been centralized more on the suppliers' perspective, consumers' or travelers' issues indicate the need for further research regarding communication, management, and destination marketing (Xiang & Gretzel, 2010).

Moreover, novel studies have also illustrated that social media has roles besides just a communication channel in tourism (Bassett, 2023). Social media also allows real-time connectivity, creating a sense of togetherness, bonding of travelers, and collaboration for documenting their experience of the destination. Regarding the applicability of social media in tourism, researchers highlight that social media has a vital role in searching for information and promoting tourism (Sahoo & B. G., 2017; Lo & Yao, 2019). Besides its influence on tourist consumption behavior, social media has contributed to research areas related to tourism and hospitality (Lawanwisut &

Thongrin, 2020). The relationship between tourism and social media has also shown many benefits, including increased consumer trust, which increases the brand reputation of the DMOs (Matthews, 2013). Moreover, besides social media's role as a communication tool, it is a powerful platform for market research (Luttrell, 2015). Many scholars argue whether social media is crucial in branding destinations through branding campaigns. Moutinho et al. (2013) and GWI (2014) also profound on the "ever-evolving channels of social media and the consumer shift represented by the new generation on destination planning" and further put emphasis on better destination branding practices to counter with various online platforms to satisfy the tourist's expectations.

A study on the roles of social influence in travel and tourism highlighted that despite its importance and natural significance, there needs to be more studies on the phenomenon of travel and tourism influencer marketing. The research indicated that 'cooperation with influencers with large followers may not be the optimal choice for marketing and promotion, as it contributed to Similarly, in other research, where destination representatives were interviewed along with analysis of social media content and relevant data to study the use of social media influencers by DMOs and influencer marketing for touristic destinations (as cited in Nadalipour et al. 2023 (Femenia-Serra & Gretzel, 2020)).

However, the thesis will focus on the suppliers' perspective, as we aim to find out how the SMIs are promoting and branding various destinations in Nepal. Although it is an evolving concept for western scholars, in the context of Nepal, the SMIs in promotion and branding destinations are completely a new emerging concept and needs thorough research on this matter.

Chapter 3. Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This section of the research forms the methodological aspect of the study. It will hold the philosophical assumptions, research design, and methodologies relevant to the thesis. Numerous research approaches have been implemented to investigate social media usage and how social media influencers are branding destinations in Nepal through their content. The study used a constructivist research paradigm followed by qualitative data. It also describes the data analysis process and how it was collected and used in the thesis. Lastly, this chapter also discusses the ethical considerations addressed, followed by the limitation considerations for the study.

3.2 Research Philosophy

According to Pedersen (2008: 137), “philosophy of science helps to improve our role as researchers in relation to basic assumptions about the world, society, knowledge, individual, language and the relationship between the theory and the empirical data”. The philosophy of science helps improve research abilities and understanding of concepts (Crotty, 1998).

The thesis is qualitative, so a constructivist approach has been used as the research aims to learn about social actors through social interactions (Saunders et al., 2016). This is important as the research aims to investigate how social media influencers are branding various destinations in Nepal through social media platforms and how their content has influenced the minds of individuals through various social networking sites about the destinations. The reason for opting constructivist approach is that it uses semi-structured interviews to understand and interpret different meanings derived through interaction and conversation with the social actors (Saunders et al., 2016).6).

In the words of Guba and Lincoln (1994), the ontological aspect is a philosophical discipline exploring the nature of reality and the interplay between the researcher and the phenomenon itself. It stands true for the research as the aim of social media influencers is to promote and brand the destination Nepal, which is portrayed as a distinct image in the eyes of tourists. However, as put forward by Guba and Lincoln

(1994), in the subjectivist view, multiple realities exist because of their interactions with the destination in different circumstances and the content they are exposed to, and as a result, the individuals may have a different image of the same destination.

A social constructivist paradigm regarding the epistemological approach has been adopted for the research. It says that people derive meanings as they engage themselves with the world they are interpreting (Guba and Lincoln, 1994), and is subjective and enhanced by social and cultural aspects (Bryman, 2012). To assess the current scenario of the usage of social media in the tourism industry of Nepal, the changes it has brought around because of its inclusion, and how the contents of the social media influencers aided in branding of destination, it requires an understanding of how contents and word of mouth are exchanged between the individuals about tourism of Nepal. Therefore, a constructivist method has been chosen as it allows the evaluation of various interpretations that recognize the various perspectives and meanings the individuals have on the tourism destinations of Nepal.

As we have opted for qualitative methods, the philosophy of constructivism has been selected to integrate the collected qualitative data and interpret the data to give a meaningful concept. The study aims to investigate social media usage in destination branding, so the focus will be on the narratives and interpretations of various social media users in Nepali tourism to better understand how they contribute to destination branding.

3.3 Research Approach

Inductive research has been chosen for the study, as it is most relevant to our thesis and philosophy of science discussed above. This approach allows for the development and change of the theoretical framework after the collection of data to name patterns or theories (Friedrichs & Kratochwil, 2009).

Inductive research encompasses empirical data into theoretical frameworks that can be used to support and reform the existing theories on destination branding. However, it nurtures new insights and explanations by identifying patterns and relationships within the data. It is relevant to our thesis, as according to Kovacs and Spens (2005),

it enables a flexible and continual data collection and analysis process. As we get a better and deeper understanding of Nepal's social media usage scenario and how influencers deploy it to the destination's branding, we will continuously be able to revise research questions, methods, and frameworks.

3.4 Data Collection

Data collection is an important part of research and varies accordingly. The study has collected primary and secondary data for this research.

3.4.1. Primary Data

Primarily, a few popular social media influencers have been interviewed using semi-structured interview questions, allowing a better understanding and explanation of the research's context. This will make the research analysis precise and centered on the research question.

The social media influencers chosen for the study shared their content on different social media platforms. A semi-structured questionnaire was used to collect information to acknowledge the scenario of social media usage in Nepal and how social media influencers have been able to brand destinations through these platforms for their audiences. Due to time constraints, only a handful of popular social media influencers have chosen the research.

In-depth Semi-structured Interviews

According to Showkat & Praveen (2017), in-depth semi-structured interviews “grant gathering of qualitative data to grasp more about the experiences, opinions, and viewpoints of the participants.” The abovementioned interview method is chosen, as it allows us to understand, communicate, and foster in-depth open discussion to understand better how social media influencers have used social media platforms to brand destinations in Nepal. Popular social media influencers with high coverage and followers were part of the research. All social media influencers are vloggers; however, they interact and post their content for their audiences on various social media

platforms. These interviewees were selected as their narratives were vital in understanding and achieving the research's aims and goals.

The research used semi-structured interviews to gain deeper understanding and probe follow-up questions based on responses. Showkat & Parveen (2017) states that question asking skill is essential as it enables the interviewer to assimilate on the topic and voice their opinions and thoughts on the research topic.

Table 2: Profiles of Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

S. No.	Names of SMIs	Position of Interviewees
1.	Ghumante	Founder
2.	Herne Katha	Founder
3.	Nepalitanguy Dai	Founder
4.	Manshee Agrawal	Founder
5.	Traverart	Founder

3.4.2 Secondary Data

Secondary data collection has been used in research to broaden the literature review. Our research aims to investigate the current scenario of social media usage in Nepalese tourism and how social media influencers are branding and promoting destinations through these social media platforms. Therefore, secondary data is vital for the research as it imparts added knowledge and data for the research topic. Although prior research has been studied on digital marketing and promotion of tourism in Nepal, destination branding by social media influencers through social media platforms has yet to be widely covered. Most of the research focuses on the efficiency of social media in promoting Nepalese tourism, digital marketing of tourism in Nepal, and so forth. However, it does not include the destination branding and promotion of tourism in Nepal by social media influencers, who are vital stakeholders

in Nepal's tourism industry. As a result, a study on this aspect allows an understanding of destination branding and promotion through social media platforms in Nepal.

The study has accessed and analyzed official documents such as dissertations, articles, books, newspapers, journals, and the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) to collect relevant data. The research paper has adopted secondary data sources to support the literature review and power up the primary data in data collection, knowing that the available primary data are inadequate to address the questions and make our research academically complete. Our thesis objectifies to be constructive in understanding the social media and social media influencers as the significant actors for place branding and glorifying its images in the tourism diasporas. Nevertheless, the theme of social media and content creator's emergence in the tourism and service sector is already experienced in other parts of the world. It is vital to acknowledge that despite limited resources and limited availability of secondary data, this topic is less explored in the academic domain and needs to be featured more in reports, journals, publications, and even government reports in the Nepalese context. Despite this, the paper offers some insights into tourism in Nepal, ICT development, and its usage.

As the researchers for this study, we have found some academic resources and documents about tourism in Nepal, as well as social media and social media influencers. Based on the available assets, secondary data on destination marketing, branding, promoting strategies, and so forth have been collected thoroughly. Importantly, we have also used data from dissertations, journals, newspapers, YouTube videos, and vloggers' opinions and experiences to explore the applicable topics.

3.4.3 Thematic Data Analysis

As per Braun and Clarke (2008), researchers employed a thematic analysis to understand the interviews in their study; thus, we adopted this data analysis strategy in our research. This involved interviewing people, with some interviews translated from Nepali to English. Thematic analysis is finding patterns and essential ideas in qualitative data, like interview transcripts. It allows researchers to summarize the information and understand distinct aspects of their study topic. The researchers

followed a six-step process to analyze the interviews. This included carefully reading the transcripts, producing codes to categorize exciting parts, and then finding and describing the main themes that appeared (ibid).

In the first stages of our research, we meticulously immersed ourselves in the interview data. This involved actively listening to the audio recordings at least once while reviewing and rereading the corresponding transcripts multiple times. To extract meaningful insights relevant to the research goals, we embarked on a process of first coding. Through a rigorous analysis of these codes, we could discern recurring themes. These themes captured the current state of social media and social media influencers and how their contents are being looked like subjects that are dynamizing the tourism landscape in Nepal in branding and promoting the destinations. The study underwent a rigorous process of theme identification and refinement. This process ensured that the chosen themes were directly relevant and significant to the research. By employing theme analysis on the interview data, the researcher gained a comprehensive understanding of marketing and branding through social media celebrities and their continuous content production to heighten the tourism aspects in Nepal.

3.5 Triangulation

We have adopted a triangulation method in our research on social media, content creators, and their influence in branding and promoting the destination in Nepal's tourism practices. This approach involves comparing data collected from various sources to strengthen the foundation of our study's central theme. We concur with Mark and Shotland (1987), who emphasize that triangulation yields more robust and correct results when each measurement technique focuses on the same subject. This aligns with Yin's (2013) perspective that triangulation is a process of cross-confirmation. However, it is essential to acknowledge the potential limitations highlighted by Wiersma, particularly the possibility that qualitative data may only sometimes converge ideally.

Therefore, our results may include a variety of possible answers, one of which could be the correct solution we are looking for. To address this, we have employed online

semi-structured interviews, online research, and secondary data sources such as websites, vlogs, newspaper articles, journals and articles, and so forth. This multifaceted approach allows us to triangulate the data and enhance the validity of our research.

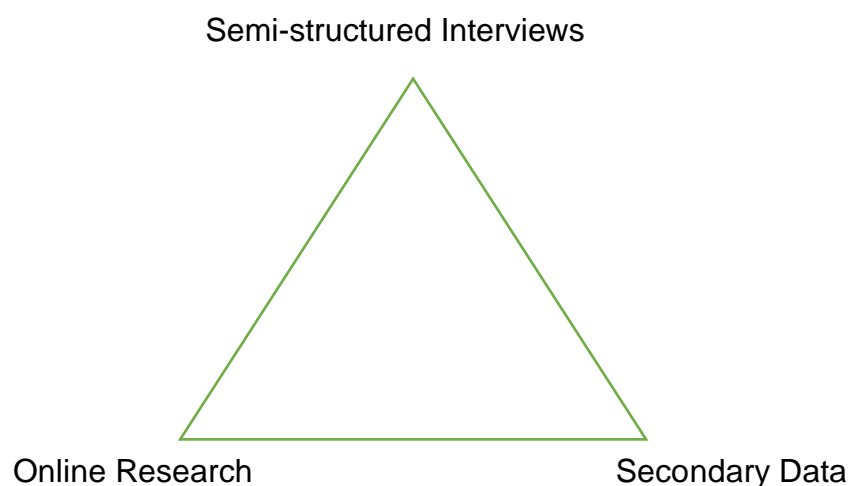


Figure 5: Triangulation

(Source: Own Elaboration)

3.6 Ethical Consideration

Researchers across disciplines grapple with ethical dilemmas throughout the research process. In qualitative research, which delves into understanding lived experiences, ethical considerations are not just a formality but a crucial aspect that ensures the well-being of participants and the integrity of the study. Informed consent, as Saunders (2012) underscores, is the bedrock of ethical interviewing. Participants must be given the freedom to choose to participate, fully comprehending the potential implications of their involvement. This is especially pertinent in online research, where the collection and analysis of personal data raise additional ethical concerns. Ethical research places participant dignity at the forefront. Flick (2018) stresses the significance of equipping participants with adequate information to make informed decisions about their participation. This transparency fosters trust and cultivates a collaborative

research environment. By upholding ethical principles, researchers ensure that qualitative studies yield valid and reliable results and contribute to knowledge in a manner that respects and safeguards those who partake.

To ensure informed consent and foster open communication, all participants in our study were recruited voluntarily. We allowed them to choose their preferred language for the interview, facilitating a more comfortable and nuanced discussion of information. Invitations were extended at the participants' convenience through formal emails, messenger calls, and text messages. To protect confidentiality, participant identities are not revealed within this research. Before the interview, participants were briefed on the study's nature and aims. Each participant was explicitly informed of their right to decline to answer any questions considered uncomfortable and to withdraw from the interview process at any point. Additionally, they were offered the opportunity to receive a final copy of the completed research project. Finally, we obtained informed consent to conduct the interviews online and assured participants that all collected information would be used solely for academic purposes. These ethical principles were strictly adhered to, ensuring the integrity of our study.

3.7 Methodological Limitations

This thesis on social media and influencers in destination branding in Nepal has methodological constraints. It might question accuracy and generalization as its study and research view must be improved, particularly for interviews and data analysis. Besides, only a few interviewees participated, and limited responses were received through email. Importantly, had we been on a field trip, we would have received and investigated a more comprehensive response and more dynamic response. Nevertheless, we could not go on a field trip to Nepal due to our financial and other travel difficulties. These methodological constraints, including the limited number of interviewees and the lack of on-site research, may have implications for the generalizability and depth of our findings. It's important to note that while our findings may not fully represent the entire population, they still provide valuable insights into the experiences and perceptions of the participants.

This project adopted a desktop research approach alongside a qualitative strategy relying on semi-structured interviews conducted via email. While this approach yielded valuable data, it also presented limitations that must be acknowledged. Firstly, email correspondence can be time-consuming, leading to delays in participant responses. Secondly, the research team was confined to a finite pool of interviewees, potentially impeding the comprehensiveness of the data gathered. Ideally, on-site field research would have provided a richer understanding of the topic; however, the constraints necessitated this alternative approach. Furthermore, a larger interview pool could have facilitated a more nuanced analysis by incorporating a broader range of stakeholder perspectives. These limitations underscore the need for further exploration and improvement in our research methods.

In conclusion, the thesis is qualitative, and a constructivist approach has been used in the research. Further, inductive research has been chosen for the study, as it is most relevant to our thesis as it allows for the development and change of the theoretical framework after data collection to identify patterns. In addition, a thematic analysis was used to understand the interviews in their study to find patterns and essential ideas in qualitative data, like interview transcripts and semi-structured interviews, to gain a deeper understanding and probe follow-up questions based on responses. Interviews were translated from Nepali to English. Showkat and Parveen (2017) state that these skills are essential as they enable the interviewer to assimilate the topic and voice their opinions and thoughts on the research topic. We also have discussed methodological limitations, such as a small sample size for the research and an observational approach to primary data collection would have allowed qualitative data collection.

Chapter 4: Findings & Discussion

In this section of the thesis, our main findings will be presented. The findings are divided into four sections for simplification and allocation in general themes: Profiles of SMIs, current practices of social media usage in tourism Nepal, changes due to social media and SMIs in Nepalese tourism, and communication of destination brands through influencers, with specific examples of successful campaigns.

4.1 Profiles of Social Media Influencers (SMIs)

The Ghumante team, a prominent group of social media influencers, believes in exploring and bringing hidden gems to its viewers so that they can actually explore and experience them themselves. Their contents embody narratives of various uncharted communities, highlighting their unique traditions and culture.

The Herne Katha team, through their storytelling, not only shares the local community's culture but also uplifts their mundane routines, making them extraordinary. Their web documentary series narrates the lives of ordinary people and communities in Nepal, aiming to foster unity among people from all social classes within Nepal and globally.

Nepali Tanguy Dai, a French national who has made Nepal his home, is deeply passionate about the people and cultures of Nepal. He believes that a place's true identity lies in its people and unique culture. His promotion of Nepal is based on its diverse lifestyles, cuisine, and celebrations, and he immerses himself in the culture to better understand and appreciate the people and their way of life.

Mannsi Agrawal, an International corporate trainer, transformational keynote speaker, communications coach, and influencer, has significantly promoted Nepal. Her first notable video was titled "7 Reasons to Never, Ever Visit Nepal", which was hugely successful. Through this experience, she shared that ".... (..) Nepal has not been able to promote things well, or else there is paradise everywhere in this country, and there must be no land like Nepal in the entire world in terms of inside and outside beauty."

Traverart, a famous social media influencer, focuses on travel and aesthetic storytelling. He provides viewers with a unique immersive travel experience through various destinations in Nepal. His intense focus on unexplored destinations with local people, culture, and food has significantly promoted these areas. His vlogs are usually in English to persuade international viewers to visit the majestic country of Nepal.

Table 3: Profile of Interviewees

Influencers	Established Dates: Vlogger/Influencer	Focus
Ghumante	2015	Hidden Destinations
Herne Katha	2018	Narratives of local community & culture
Nepali Tanguy Dai	2022	People and Culture
Mannsi Agrawal	2020	Exclusive Tourism
Traverart	2020	Adventure

4.2. Practices of social media usage in tourism in Nepal

The current scenario of social media usage in Nepal is similar to any tourism in other nations. The primary goal of social media is to provide information reviews and share pictures and videos of the destination so that potential tourists can decide to visit that destination.

Interviewee 3, one of the exceedingly popular French vloggers living in Nepal since 2008, told in the interview that "Social media is a cost-effective way to market and promote, for instance, making Nepal known as an international tourism platform showcasing the various gems, the identity of the ethnic groups, traditions, and culture."

Interviewee 2, too, voiced that "social media acts as a tool for promoting and sharing content about the unexplored destinations to our viewers." In addition, the interviewee stressed that "it has become very easy to share and interact with our viewers/influencers about the destinations." This interaction promotes the destinations and fosters a sense of community engagement, making the audience feel connected and involved.

Indeed, all our research participants confirm their use of social media. Although the interviewed influencers voice similar opinions on social media usage, all of them imply that social media is a crucial tool for sharing information about destinations and interacting with their followers/viewers to persuade them to visit and experience the advocated destinations. However, the patterns and trends in Nepal in terms of creator's usage perspective can be viewed as interviewee no.3 explains:

"It takes more space. However, some people are specialists in social media. I am not. Some pages specialize in promoting places (Nepali, for example). My first job was to make a good video on the YouTube platform."

"I regret that some creators are more focused on social networks than the main video. However, it is the new world!"

Outstandingly, when asked about the challenges and opportunities associated with the use of social media in Nepal for Influencers, they commented as follows:

"The main challenge for me is to be a foreigner. I am highlighting a country that is not mine. So, I must learn the language, try to dive into it, and make the people trust me. But it worked well as everyone noticed I am a true Nepal lover."- Interviewee 3

When asked about the challenges and opportunities associated with the use of social media in Nepal, Interviewee 1 candidly shared their experience: "The challenges, mostly financial, were significant. We sought support from government bodies in the past, but the process complications and corruption forced us to back out. We now have a few sponsors and partners, and the support from the locals is immense. Fortunately, we have a substantial viewership these days."

"I met challenges with my tourism campaigns, including their time-consuming nature and insufficient revenue generation. To address these obstacles, I decided to drop them." -Interviewee 4

4.2.1. The Pandemic: An Eye Opener

The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly altered the strategies and content of social media influencers in Nepal's tourism sector. Previously, these influencers focused on showcasing Nepal's natural beauty and cultural attractions, promoting personal travel experiences and the allure of adventure. However, the pandemic's restrictions and health concerns exposed vulnerabilities in the tourism sector, compelling influencers to reassess their roles and responsibilities.

About this, one of the interviewees put her strong view, saying how she thought of people about the COVID pandemic and so forth:

"We are responsible for using our platforms to raise awareness, advocate for change, offer moments of levity, connect with our audience, and produce content that uplifts and inspires. In a world inundated with human negativity, the act of sharing positivity can be a powerful antidote and a source of empowerment to everyone staying with their families and friends" - Interviewee 4

Correspondently, interviewee 1 remarked that:

"During the pandemic, many people told us they felt like they were traveling with us when they watched our tourism videos. These reviews urged us to explore more attractive destinations and to make people easy despite the unforeseen conditions."

Besides, most of our participants confessed that the pandemic pushed them to leave the common tourist areas and look for places that were less populated and unexplored yet had enormous potential for tourists.

"After the pandemic hit globally, the tourism sector of Nepal, which is one of the main contributors to Nepal's GDP, was *hampered badly*. Social media and social media

influencers are synonymous; we think influencers focus on untapped destinations and bring it forward to our viewers," opined Interviewee 5. Further, the same study found that "tourists perceive social media platforms as informative, helpful, easily accessible and valuable" (ibid).

Similarly, interviewee 3, when asked about his opinion on natural disasters and his motivation for creating influencing content as SMIs:

"I started the channel in April 2022. I have been living in Nepal for a few years. I fell in love quickly with the place and was involved in social work. So, after living through the earthquake and lockdown times, I felt the envy of traveling more, discovering more about the country, and sharing the experience to promote tourism and show the beauty and diversity of Nepal. It was a love declaration to one place, one folk":

Likewise, interviewee 4 said, *"I was motivated to start my journey because I was bored during the lockdown, and I planned primarily in branding destinations revolving around popularizing lesser-known places in Nepal and fostering prosperity within the country."*

Moreover, when asked, *"How do you look back at your incredible journey from COVID-19 so far?"*

She said, *"I did not think I could reach this far and leave an impression not only on Nepalese audiences but equally on foreign travelers. For me, COVID-19 is like a blessing in disguise, I would say."*

The COVID-19 pandemic served as a wake-up call for many travel influencers on social media, forcing them to shift from their comfort zone to explore new destinations. One key revelation for influencers has been realizing their influence and reach. With international tourists unable to visit, influencers have become a vital source of information and connection for tourism products. Many influencers have shifted their focus towards promoting domestic tourism, encouraging Nepalis to explore their own country. This highlights the influencers' ability to target local audiences and their

commitment to promoting responsible, sustainable tourism practices, reassuring the audience about the industry's future.

"Our main goal is to get the destination noticed. We also want the tourists to appreciate and enjoy the local culture and traditions. We also want to promote/encourage responsible and sustainable tourism. This, in turn, would help the lives of the locals and prevent a few youths from leaving the country for livelihood."

The COVID-19 pandemic has catalyzed a significant shift in the strategies employed by social media influencers within Nepal's tourism sector. Rather than emphasizing the destination's aesthetic appeal, influencers now prioritize promoting responsible tourism practices and advocating for local communities' well-being. This heightened awareness is expected to positively and last impact Nepal's tourism industry in the post-pandemic era.

Additionally, interviewee 1 mentioned that *"we did not only promote the destinations, local theme, and community activities however: raising awareness about the pandemic, sanitations activities and sending a message to be responsible were also our messages included in our contents during COVID-19."*

Likewise, interviewee 4 shared that *"besides uploading content on tourism resources, I was equally wise to produce such content that can help in awareness, safety measured and prevention tips as per the WHO guidelines."*

When asked the same question, interviewee 5 responded, *"This is the perfect time to pay back to the community; hence, we took part in some charitable online campaigns and created self-care practices videos as well. At any cost, we wanted to uplift the followers' spirit. To be honest, during the interview process, many sent their gratitude messages, which made us more responsible and concerned for society."*

Through these above statements by the participants, we can draw our insights that Influencers play diverse roles beyond marketing, promotion, and branding. They create content, seek monetary gain, prove social responsibility, and promote human connection. Examining their actions through different lenses shows that those

influencers can wield significant power even when acting independently. They generate valuable information to promote destinations and inspire local communities. While their primary focus may be on commercial gain, they contribute to broader societal goals through their platform and influence. This multifaceted approach highlights the potential of influencers to effect positive change, transcending traditional marketing roles. They act as bridges between brands, destinations, and audiences, easing deeper engagement and understanding. Influencers can foster a sense of community and shared purpose by using their unique positions to help the individual and society.

4.2.3 Promoting Hidden Places, treasures of Nepal

National Geographic said the solution to over-tourism is providing alternative, beautiful destinations unfamiliar to tourists. In the context of Nepal, there are plentiful hidden treasures known only to the locals but yet to be exposed to potential external tourists. These hidden treasures include remote villages, pristine natural landscapes, and unique cultural experiences. It is also clear that the recent shift of the tourism industry has moved towards visiting unfamiliar places. The demand for such destinations has increased due to the uniqueness and authentic experience that the destinations have to offer. In such cases, the role of SMIs becomes relevant and crucial to bring the hidden gems to the limelight of social media for their audience to visit. Based on this, several informants acknowledge that the hidden treasures of Nepal must be publicized to increase the inflow of tourists.

"Nepal is a diverse country, It is not just mountains and views; every place has unique appeal..." -Interviewee 1.

Similarly, Interviewee 2 asserted that *"..... the aim behind our videos is to help our target group to plan their trips, which are mostly informative, to raw and unexplored terrain....". Comparably, one of the respondents remarked that "we prefer exploring interesting places with cultures which have not been explored,something new for the audience and our content too."* - Interviewee 5

Social media platforms have successfully promoted Nepal's popular destinations in the world's tourist map. However, very few have highlighted Nepal's raw and unexplored hidden destinations. The participants expressed their frustration that despite Nepal's richness and diversity of places and cultures, most tourists and locals will only visit famous destinations like Pokhara, Katmandu, Lumbini, and Bandipur. This concentration of tourists in a few popular destinations has led to a phenomenon known as 'over-tourism,' which is a concern for the sustainability of these destinations. However, many unexplored destinations have brilliant potential for tourists, and promoting them could help alleviate the pressure on popular destinations and distribute tourism more evenly.

One of the participants, Interviewee 3, voiced that "(.....) Nepal is not only about Kathmandu, Pokhara, Trekking; as there are hidden gems which needs further attention and worth a visit." Further, Interviewee 2, who uploads a bi-monthly web series of various destinations with the narratives of unique people through captivating storytelling, shared that "....., we wanted to focus the limelight away from the popular often fabricated destinations with luxury, and rather emphasize on the local community with their story highlighting their daily routines, struggles, culture and of course the place from where they belong".

Likewise, interviewee 1 remarked, "We look for unexplored and unknown destinations that hold tourism potential. By unexplored, we mean often hard to reach, not yet discovered by mainstream tourists, and offering unique experiences. The other interviewed participant commented, "We look for interesting places with cultures that have been and give something new for the audience. Unexplored destinations appeal to tourists because they offer a sense of adventure and discovery and often provide a more authentic and less crowded experience compared to popular tourist spots." Interviewee 5 agreed.

Hence, the social media influencers in Nepal are trying to focus on attracting tourists to budding, unexplored, and less familiar destinations. A few interviewed participants highlighted that their content focused on the narratives of the people and the food. For instance, one of the contributors, Interviewee 1, new places, free from crowds with good, genuine hospitality, are worth exploring. They shared a successful campaign

where they featured a lesser-known destination, and after the video was released, the number of tourists to that area significantly increased. This demonstrates the power of social media influencers in promoting hidden gems.

"Our very first oneShey Phoksumdo of Dolpo.....Honestly, I just wanted to visit and make a video.....but once the video was out, the number of travelers in the area increased... it is not too much if I say Phoksumdo Lake has almost become a mainstream destination." This anecdote is supported by data that shows a significant increase in the number of tourists to Shey Phoksumdo after the video was released, demonstrating the tangible impact of social media influencers on tourism to hidden destinations.

Correspondingly, *"Yes, it happened. Some Nepali people told me they visited some places I had visited, like in Terai. They said they were surprised to see that in their own country. Some foreigners as well said they came to Nepal after seeing my videos."*

-Interviewee 3

In addition, Interviewee 4 claimed that "Absolutely! My content has effectively influenced the local community by displaying alternative narratives of the destination. A prime example is the Khaptab video, which highlighted the beauty of Khaptad and put it in the spotlight, encouraging locals to embrace and promote their unique destination." This demonstrates how the work of social media influencers not only promotes tourism but also empowers local communities and helps preserve their unique cultures.

4.6. Communicating the destination brand through the influencers

The content posted on social platforms in pictures, videos, blogs, and vlogs has contributed to marketing tourism experiences. In addition, it has engraved a unique image of the destination on the potential tourist's mind. The content posted by popular social media influencers on destinations will further add meaning and encourage its followers to visit the places publicized and shown, as they are considered credible sources of information. However, it is important to note that social media influencers are not without their limitations. They may not accurately represent the destination or

its culture, and their influence can be fleeting. Therefore, using their platform responsibly and in conjunction with other marketing strategies is crucial.

4.6.1 Contesting stereotypes by centering the narratives of the minority community

Our findings showed that the destination branding through the SMIs in Nepal was different from that through the mainstream media and the DMOs. Most destinations promoted and branded by DMOs were only popular destinations, which could lead to overall over-tourism. Unlike the DMOs, the influencers emphasized the hidden treasures, which needed more exposure to make known the people, culture, and story of such unmapped destinations. This highlights the contrasting strategies of DMOs and influencers, with the former focusing on popular destinations and the latter on hidden gems.

Some interviewees explained the importance of presenting the narrative of the minorities. For instance, Interviewee 1 said, *"We strongly focus on culture, traditions, and the hospitality of locals. We rarely visit a destination without a local. This ensures we have an excellent guide who can stand for the people of the destination.....to help us keep the authentic name of places...."* Further, they added, *"It is not mainstream, but it is amazing.... way to visit a place."*

Interviewee 2 explained that *"our mission is to change the stereotype about promoting the destination by presenting the narratives through the storytelling of the destination about the people and culture. Interviewee 2 affirms that "we reach out to places and people which are intentionally or unintentionally dumped by big media houses because of not being a marketable content.... we aim to connect with local people through the narratives of their unheard stories which needs to be heard....."* Interviewee 2 shared, *"For the story of the school, where we visited all girls' school, no media has had access to the premises till now. The management and the community showed great cooperation and were proud that we were covering the story of their hardships."*

Likewise, one of the participants testifies that people and their identity highlight the destination's image. Additionally, advocates that *".....Landscape, people, cuisine, and celebrations are all components that make up the DNA of the place. That is what*

makes Nepal. I work as an intermediary, as I understand both the Nepalese people and the foreigners. I try to portray the place best by highlighting the real tradition and having adventurous time with the local people"-Interviewee 3.

Analogously, Interviewee 1 explained that the *"history of the destination, the culture and traditions, beliefs, and myths, followed by people and authenticity are the main characteristics that highlight the distinctiveness of the destination. We want to display the cultures and traditions that are about to be extinct or are unknown to many. For instance, Khyali Nach/dance is a tradition that few Nepalese people know. It is a dance where men adorned and dressed as women go house to house to bless the newborn child during Dashain."*

Similarly, several respondents commented that it is essential to share the beautiful culture and tradition of the minority group, which is on the verge of distinction, and its importance for the local community. From this perspective, interviewee 3 responded that:

"When I had the opportunity to visit Dadi, far west region of Nepal, to meet the local Tharu community with the last tattooed women in their village. Sadly, only two are still, and interestingly, although coming from the same community, they have diverse ways of tattooing and hold the same reason for it. Such things are not covered in the mainstream media, and we are responsible for presenting such great local cultures to the audience as they add value to the destination and tourist prospects."

Moreover, Interviewee 4 commented that to brand and promote the destination, the storytelling of the local people plays a crucial role. The participant remarked that:

"Branding destinations revolves around popularizing less-known places in Nepal.....and destination image and identity heavily depend on the storytelling of people and its culture rooted with that community."

In addition, Interviewee 5 affirmed that *"we try to uncover the unique culture, breathtaking landscapes, and the resilient spirit of the local communities... and prepare our viewers for a rare glimpse of an unforgettable adventure in the world's most elusive*

destinations. We had the chance to reveal Nar Pu, the most isolated Tibetan village, untouched and pristine from modernity."

It is clear from the statements of the interview participants that destinations are being promoted unconventionally by challenging stereotypes through narratives of minorities/local communities and highlighting their culture, mundane routines, and traditions. Further, it is also evident from the explanation of the SMIs that they have become a medium or channel for the local communities willing to share their pristine culture, tradition, and the place they belong to. It cannot be denied that SMIs, with their ability to connect with their vast audience via a single hashtag, have become incredibly significant in promoting tourism in Nepal.

4.6.2 Collaboration with other Stakeholders

The interviewees mentioned they could collaborate with DMOs and private enterprises. DMOs, as the official destination marketing organizations, play a crucial role in facilitating influencer marketing. They see it as a vital medium for marketing their destinations to domestic and international tourists. Some of the interviewed SMIs have worked directly with the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), the official DMO, to promote destinations in Nepal to tourists worldwide. At the same time, many have joined forces with private organizations. One of the interviewees has experienced collaborating with significant stakeholders of Nepal to promote and brand destinations, and many of the respondents had mixed experiences with it.

In this context, Interviewee 4 responded, *"I have collaborated with the Tourism Board of Nepal and Kantipur Television; they reached out to me to promote some destinations of Nepal."* Similarly, Interviewee 1 said, *"We have collaborated with other stakeholders several times, most often with the local businesses and local community. However, the experiences with NTB have always been disappointing."*

Likewise, Interviewee 3 commented that for them, collaboration was with fellow YouTubers and Travel influencers with similar tastes and passion for storytelling. In addition, one of the interviewees asserted that:

"Yes, our collaboration was with Hyundai, a renowned private enterprise. We embarked on a 700 km (about half the distance from Florida to New York City) trip through Pokhara, Bandipur, and Chitwan Community Homestay, showcasing the diversity of Nepal's destinations. This collaboration was a testament to the potential of partnerships with private enterprises in destination branding." -Interviewee 5

SIMs from various countries participated with the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB) in collaboration with USAID to promote Nepalese tourism (Republica, June 1, 2023). Sadly, the focus was only on Nepal's major popular tourist destinations through storytelling on social media platforms. However, unlike SIMs interviewed for our study, the focus was on the mainstream rather than the local communities whose stories need to be heard, cultures and traditions to be shared, and the place to enjoy. Furthermore, one of the participant's interviewees said:

"...Although the governmental bodies appreciate our work but have not directly contributed/supported on any of our projects." Further, "We sought financial support from the governmental bodies in the past, but the complications in the process and corruption had us back out. However, the support from the locals is huge, and we have few trusted sponsors and partners now." - Interviewee 1.

This statement, voiced by the above respondent, presents us with a unique perspective of bias by the NTB. For instance, Interviewee 3, an international SIM living in Nepal since 2008, briefed that NTB had helped with plane tickets for traveling to destinations; however, it has not worked with NTB in any way. This is in contrast, as Interviewee 1 has collaborated with NTB but did not get any support from them on any of their projects. Moreover, Interviewee 2 started their web series vlogging to collaborate with the local communities and share their unheard narratives of their culture, tradition, and place because they wanted to move away from mainstream journalism. It is thus interesting to see that despite the SIM's different motives for collaboration and experiences, they all want to promote, brand, and share the unexplored places in Nepal through narratives of the local people embodying culture and tradition to their audiences both domestically and internationally, showcasing the diverse motives and experiences of SIMs.

To conclude, The COVID-19 pandemic was an eye-opener for the SMIs in the tourism industry, as it urged most of our interviewees to start their journey on social media to promote various destinations and, more importantly, the hidden gems of Nepal. All our research participants confirm their use of social media. Although the interviewed influencers voice similar opinions on social media usage, they all imply that social media is crucial for sharing information about destinations and interacting with their followers/viewers to persuade them to visit and experience the advocated destinations. However, the patterns and trends in Nepal in terms of creator's usage perspective differed among the SMIs.

Further, collaboration with DMOs and private enterprises was deemed important by all SMIs. However, not all participants were happy to work with Nepal's main DMO, the NTB. Findings showed that the destination branding through the SMIs in Nepal was different from that through the mainstream media and the DMOs. Most destinations promoted and branded by DMOs were only popular destinations, which could lead to overall over-tourism. The influencers emphasized the hidden treasures, which needed more exposure to make known the people, culture, and story of such unmapped destinations. This highlights the contrasting strategies of DMOs and influencers, with the former focusing on popular destinations and the latter on hidden gems.

4.7. Discussion

This section of the thesis discusses the research findings. It also addresses the theoretical and practical contributions of SMIs in branding and promoting destinations, highlights the limitations, and recommends future research.

The findings of our study show that SMIs play a significant role in branding the destination through the narratives of the local community. To do so, the SMIs collaborate with the local people to communicate their unheard tales or narratives of the destination, often embodying their culture, traditions, and way of life to their audience. They also impart information on the destinations, highlighting the unique atmosphere of the local community. This part will discuss the main research question:

How are social media influencers branding destinations in Nepal, and how can our present study answer this?

4.7.1 Grassroots branding through narratives of the people, place, and culture

The most striking theme that surfaced during the discussion with the social media influencers about branding of destination was the reoccurrence of the narratives of common people, culture, and their work of life to make the unknown place known to the targeted audience. This approach, known as 'grassroots branding', 'is a community-focused branding where the local people play active involvement in the creation and promotion of the identity of a destination through the local people by underlying the culture, traditions, and ways of life. The SMIs act as a medium for the destinations to communicate the image and the value of the destination brands through interaction with their target audience. In addition, tapping into the knowledge of the locals and their love for the place allows a competitive advantage over other popular destinations. Nepal is rich in culture, heritage, and hidden destinations, which have enormous potential to elevate Nepal in the world's tourism map but differently.

Our research findings revolve around the promotion of hidden places/treasures in Nepal and the SMI's role in presenting such gems to their audiences through the narratives of the local people and showcasing their culture and traditions. Numerous literatures on destination branding have studied consumer-generated content through the scope of the tourists and the DMOs (Lim et al. 2012). However, destination branding through the community or the local people has not been the mainstream of destination branding research. Our research findings point towards the latter statement, branding the destination through the local people in collaboration with the SMIs as a medium for promoting the destination. The primary role of any social media influencer is to promote destinations by collaborating with DMOs to gain better audience interaction (Xu & Pratt, 2018). Nonetheless, the findings of our study lead to a new direction. For instance, some of the interviewees refused to collaborate with the DMOs, especially with NTB, the country's only destination marketing agency. The participants believed that Nepal's DMOs were showing only the popular destinations of Nepal, which are already well-known; however, they have failed to promote the

unexplored hidden gems to the world, highlighting the challenges SMIs face in their collaboration with DMOs.

A destination image is a mix of organic as well as market-produced images. However, the co-creation of a destination image happens on a larger scale, which may not depict the genuine image of the destination (Hayes et al., 2013). This may hold for popular destinations where influencers want to make their content popular among audiences through sharing, posting, and hashtags. Interestingly, the results of our study show that the SMIs were keen on promoting the unexplored terrain and used the narratives of the marginalized people, the culture, and food to brand the destination. Besides, the participants also shared that post-pandemic, their main motive behind their vlogging was to explore the untouched destinations to minimize over-tourism and show a different side of Nepal but in a unique manner.

Zenker and Erfgen (2014) remarked that DMOs are criticized as they must include internal stakeholders in the long run and are only included during the first branding process. It has resulted in destination brands having no or little connection with the place's identity because of the exclusion of the local people. Based on our findings, all interviewees agree that stakeholder collaboration is the key to destination branding and longevity. Although the findings have noted that the SMIs had terrible encounters with the NTB and DMOs of Nepal, they received overwhelming support from the local people and the community. Further, some of the participants made visible local businesses, thus allowing exposure to social platforms and gaining popularity among visitors. Similarly, one of the respondents cited that they started their YouTube channel because they could not collaborate with the local community to channel their narratives of the marginalized community because of pressure from their superiors. Thus, a participatory approach to destination branding is essential for destination brands to excel and maintain longevity (Lecompte et al., 2017).

Nonetheless, it is essential to remember that narratives of the local community are a tool to support participatory destination branding and do not contribute to overall destination marketing initiatives/tourism planning and development of Nepal. Moreover, though destination co-creation and collaboration are vital, finding the balance between the involvement of the SMIs as mediators between the visitors and

the local community of the destination and coordination between all these stakeholders is significant for effective destination branding.

4.7.2 Democratization by Social Media and SMIs in Tourism of Nepal

Social Media Influencers (SMIs) have revolutionized the tourism industry in Nepal by democratizing tourism branding and promoting a more diverse and inclusive representation of the country through their creative and appealing content. Further, Pop et al. (2021) advocate that SMIs have a vital role in portraying the destination image pre-visit decisions as their trust and familiarity of the destination persuade them to visit the destinations and consider information more reliable than mainstream channels and mass media. Traditionally, tourism promotion was limited to mainstream media and focused on well-known destinations like Kathmandu, Pokhara, Chitwan, etc.

Based on the findings of the study, one of our participants says:

"Nepal is not only about Kathmandu, Pokhara but trekking as there are also hidden gems which need more attention and are worth visiting" -Interviewee 3.

However, the arrival of social media has empowered local communities and influencers to highlight lesser-known attractions, cultural heritages, subjective experiences, lifestyle, traditions, and even some particular societies (such as Raute and Chepang) and their dynamics, thereby democratizing tourism branding. In the Nepalese context, social media influencers are crucial in this process. Their extensive reach and engaged audiences allow them to effectively promote hidden gems and redirect tourist traffic from overcrowded areas to lesser-known destinations. SMIs have changed the narratives of giant traditional gatekeepers' media houses or publishers. From their contents, the unheard stories of the locals and their perspectives are finding a platform, breaking the conventional barriers, and fostering a public discourse in each destination corner.

This practice of democratization has enabled SMIs as persuasion actors through their subjects, illustrating the unobserved image of a place. Through democratization, SMIs

can even change the behavior of consumers, as they display fewer advertisements and convey more suitable, ethical, and credible information. Honesty in their opinions and purity in their products trigger aspirations in followers, which is an alternative angle compared to elite media houses. One of the examples matching the finding explicitly is how two personalities working for the mega media house BBC Nepali Sewa resigned from their post and started a YouTube channel named "Herne Katha" to show the story of the local's hardship and day-to-day activities penetrating a new role as a storyteller in the digital age. This is a perfect example of the democratization of social media and the birth of a new wave of communication dynamics, considering social media influencers have now become a new industry.

Consequently, the democratization of tourism branding in Nepal has several positive impacts. Firstly, it diversifies tourism offerings, highlighting the country's rich cultural heritage and natural beauty beyond the popular tourist hotspots.

Participant 3 sees that *"it should be a mix of all components that make the DNA of the place. You will need all the ingredients: landscape, people, cuisine, celebrations. That is what makes Nepal. If I go to Dharan, there should be Kirati dress, cheating, Sekuwa, celebrations of Udhauli, and a view of the hills, and then you can feel Dharan."*

In addition, this helps distribute tourism benefits more equitably across different regions and communities. Secondly, SMIs enable direct interaction between local communities and potential tourists, bypassing traditional intermediaries. This empowers local communities to control their narratives and directly receive help from tourism revenue. Thirdly, the democratization of tourism promotion contributes to displaying diverse destinations and experiences, encouraging travelers to explore beyond the beaten path, reducing the pressure on popular tourist sites, and promoting cultural exchange. Nonetheless, social media and influencers have the potential to democratize tourism; several challenges must be addressed. The sudden influx of tourists to newly popularized destinations can lead to environmental damage and the commodification of local cultures if not managed sustainably. To mitigate these issues, the role of SMIs and their production should imply this as an opportunity to alternate the view of mass, clarifying how digital channels and content creators are the strongest message senders in a new era of communication. In communication and delivering

perspectives or opinions, SMI's messages are ideal for sending images of a destination.

Nevertheless, images are complex entities with many sides, and certain features stand out and become strongly associated with them. For instance, France's perfumes, Germany's technology, and Spain's beaches are examples of such distinctive characteristics. While not the sole defining elements of a country, these iconic features become powerful symbols and contribute significantly to the nation's overall image. They shape how the country is perceived globally and influence its reputation with the rise of social media.

As Abhaya Pandey says:

"When the state does not have enough financial resources for standard 'Public Relations' and advertisement campaigns, social media platforms could be the best alternative. Today, some YouTubers or Vloggers have millions of subscribers; the NTB and other concerned tourism authorities or bodies should invite them to participate in cultural, religious, natural, and so forth activities with local communities taking place gradually" (Gautam, 2018).

Moreover, SMI's messages in the image display and branding of a place through local narratives, therefore, involve naming, highlighting, and communicating unique attributes. It is a strategic process that aims to create a positive and memorable impression of the country, using its strengths and distinctive qualities. This process is complex and multi-layered, encompassing tangible aspects like products and services and intangible elements such as culture, history, and values. As a result, the analysis research suggests that social media influencers are currently the preferred actors for marketing and branding in this digital age. The age-old concept of word-of-mouth, where personal recommendations sway opinions, has been amplified by the global reach of social media. Recognizing this, companies increasingly use influencers to communicate and promote their brands online.

4.7.3 Collaboration and Local Participation in Branding a Place

Place branding, creating a unique identity and image for a location, has evolved from a top-down approach (where decisions were made solely by authorities) to a more collaborative approach that emphasizes cooperation and participation from the local community. However, the research and the findings based on the practices in Nepal posit that the top-down approach, which is not practiced in the best way, has created a big vacuum between the locals, the governments, and the DMOs. The primary reason for its failure is that the decisions or strategies taken or made by the DMOs are solely their choices without adequate consultation with local communities... As a result, it leads to a sense of exclusion and left behind, which makes the locals less willing to collaborate with the state authorities.

However, partnerships, building trust, and regular communication are firmly established between the locals and the SMLs. This shift acknowledges that the success of place branding depends on involving and engaging with those who live and work in the area. Multiple respondents in our findings highlight the importance of locals and SMLs coming together and being on the same page regarding partnership and having common goals institutionalized. Social media content creators recognize the importance of engaging diverse stakeholders, including national tourism boards, local communities, businesses, and cultural institutions, to be in a similar collaborative environment.

Within this collaborative framework, local communities play a pivotal role. As caretakers of cultural heritage and possessors of invaluable knowledge about local traditions, customs, and natural resources, their involvement is crucial in crafting a genuine and sustainable brand. Research emphasizes the significance of partnering with local communities, particularly in the context of nation branding. This approach recognizes that local communities embody the core values that define a nation's identity. In Nepal, for instance, the community forestry program is a testament to the effectiveness of community-led initiatives in shaping the nation's image. Likewise, community-led tourism initiatives have successfully boosted local economies and preserved cultural heritage in the Annapurna region.

Nevertheless, when DMOs collaborate and participate, the locals' and influencers' involvement is felt thinly. Some reasons contributing to this situation could be limited local involvement in decision-making, locals' lack of ability, social barriers, economic disparities, and so forth. The dominance of Destination Management Organizations (DMOs) in financial and institutional matters often sidelines local communities, leading to their inconsistent involvement in destination promotion and branding efforts.

The participants in the research argued that getting governmental support through financial backing and promotional efforts would have been a testament had they enhanced resources and ability-building programs for effective participation in planning and development. Unfortunately, the focus on genuine issues like technological development, capacity and skills upscaling, and sustainable practices have yet to be concerning areas in the destinations, quoted one of the SMIs in the research analysis. Interestingly, collaboration among public, private, and community stakeholders has also been vital, with the SMIs playing a crucial role in developing channels and easing the role of conveying each other messages back and forth. Through agencies like the Nepal Tourism Board, the state must play a vital role in supporting initiatives considered necessary by the residents. If collaborating with grassroots organizations, social media influencers, and local governments have a common goal and target to create innovative tourism products, market them effectively, invest in local communities, and ensure the fair distribution of tourism's benefits, it might foster mutual respect and future relationships.

As mentioned in the analysis, collaborative efforts between state authorities and local communities can significantly enhance the quality and quantity of branding initiatives. This partnership uses the state's resources and the community's local knowledge to create a compelling and sustainable brand. Hence, the discussion study indicates that partnering with prestigious national and international institutions (such as embassies and diplomatic offices) and some celebrities (sports players, social activists, local influencers, and actors) can further enhance nation branding efforts. Collaborations with such institutions or individuals offer indirect marketing, as the nation's brand image can be featured in the news and communications generated by the partner. This exposure can significantly increase the nation's recognition and reputation abroad.

Therefore, it can be understood that the increasing use of social media in Nepal's tourism industry is a multifaceted phenomenon with significant implications for both the tourism sector and local communities. Social media platforms provide avenues to share diverse experiences, promote local communities, celebrate their unique offerings, and redistribute tourist traffic to lesser-known destinations. This has catalyzed Nepal's more inclusive, just, and sustainable tourism model. This model aids the tourism industry by diversifying offerings and expanding its reach. It also empowers local communities by providing economic opportunities and platforms to share their cultural heritages. Thus, using social media enables a more democratic and balanced approach to tourism in Nepal, with potential benefits for visitors and local communities in the same manner.

In conclusion, the role of SMIs in branding and promoting destinations in Nepal's tourism industry is still in the infant stage. Research has shown that SMIs in Nepal have emphasized the narratives/storytelling of people, culture, and traditions and how these attributes contribute to destination promotion and branding. Further, our study found that SMIs have played an essential role in the democratization of channels in branding and promotion of various destinations, as SMIs were able to reach unexplored destinations and offset the mainstream channels of tourism promotion, and shedding light on unheard narratives of unique people, culture and traditions. Finally, for any destination to excel, collaboration and participation of local people are vital, and the present scenario of SMIs collaborating with local people in branding destinations is promising; however, we have yet to see how it evolves over the years.

Chapter 5: Conclusion & Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

This study aims to investigate destination branding through the SMLs in the context of Nepal. Earlier studies on destination branding have emphasized the communication of branding place from the perspectives of DMOs and tourists. However, limited research has focused on including local people, culture, and traditions in branding places. In the context of Nepal, it is a limited and emerging concept, the collaboration of SMLs with the local people for destination branding. Therefore, the study aims to explore how social media influences collaboration with the local community and brand destinations.

The study thoroughly examines the influence of social media influencers (SMLs) in shaping people's feelings and travel choices, particularly in Nepal. It sheds light on how these influences significantly change potential travelers' views and decisions through their captivating and relatable content. The research underscores the power of SMLs in crafting and sharing positive narratives about Nepal's diverse attractions and the compelling stories of its local communities, thus contributing to the country's branding and marketing. SMLs, with their unique ability to set up personal connections with their followers, make Nepal appealing domestically and globally, fostering a sense of engagement and connection among the audience.

Furthermore, the study emphasizes the essential need for destination branding. It underscores the pivotal role of destination management organizations (DMOs) in establishing solid partnerships with influencers to enhance Nepal's brand image effectively. These partnerships involve DMOs providing influencers with accurate and engaging content about the destination while influencers promote the destination to their followers. Through strategic collaboration with influencers, DMOs can develop content that aligns with the destination's brand goals and resonates with the target audience, ensuring a cohesive and impactful image of Nepal. Additionally, the study highlights how a destination's brand image and influencers' branding strategies can lead to increased engagement and participation from potential visitors. In conclusion, integrating SMLs into destination branding with well-defined plans presents a promising opportunity to display Nepal's allure and visibility in the competitive global tourism

market. Moving forward, strategic partnerships and collaborations between the government and DMOs can use digital tourism platforms to strengthen the Nepalese tourism industry and ensure its sustained success. The main findings of the research are as follows:

- The post-pandemic crisis was an eye-opening chapter for the SMIs, as all the participants in the study's first motivation was to promote unexplored destinations to minimize over-tourism from popular destinations. They also wanted to present hidden gems/destinations with potential for tourism for both domestic and international tourists.
- SMIs have found that the narratives/storytelling of the local people embodying culture, tradition, and way of life are essential attributes of destination branding.
- The usage of SM platforms through SMIs has democratized the communication channel, allowing marginalized people's voices to be heard and providing SMIs with an opportunity to present Nepal as an unexplored destination with immense tourism potential.
- The collaboration with the main DMO, the Nepal Tourism Board (NTB), is still being determined and ambiguous. The favoritism and nepotism of international SMIs, while SMIs are not included in campaigns to promote destinations in Nepal, is debatable.

5.2 Theoretical Contributions

Destination brands are driven by three factors: reputation, identity, and feeling (Hankinson, 2007). They have unique attributes that are unlike traditional products/services. Moreover, many studies have pointed out that it is hard to differentiate destinations by complex factors (such as infrastructure, accessibility, and availability of financial incentives) but by soft factors such as environment, friendliness of the people, and leisure activities, which are more important to tourists and investors alike (Morgan et al., 2011). Our findings show that the interviewed SMIs have used these soft factors for destination promotion and branding. Further, studies have shown

that supporting a positive brand image through SMIs increased visitations to the destination (Wu et al., 2011).

Prior research has written down destination branding communication through social media by locals, tourists, and DMOs (Jabreel et al., 2018). It shows how compatibility between the SMIs and the audience can show the uniqueness of the destinations. Further, the brand values and identity of the destination often need to be more interactive and exciting (Xu & Pratt, 2018). Therefore, this study presents new insights into how social influencers can collaborate with the local community and DMOs to add value to marketing and branding strategies.

Further, the destination is not identified by the visual or destination image itself but also comprises emotional values attached to the destination (Morgan et al., 2002). Hence, the local community, who understands the place's image, story, and culture better, can collaborate with SMIs and DMOs to provide a memorable experience to the targeted visitors.

5.3 Practical Implications

The research of our findings highlights that SMI's content on destination is a reliable source of information and encourages visitors to increase the frequency of visitation (Gretzel et al., 2020). SMIs focus away from the mainstream of popular destinations, instead encouraging exploring the hidden treasures and cultures. Cooperation between DMOs and SMIs is essential for such destinations to flourish and become famous. Further, the study also uncovered that Nepal's DMOs collaborated with international SMIs. However, local influencers, who are more familiar with the local community and its traditions and culture, are the true gems. Their involvement offers better chances of showing the destination to the audiences and increases the chances of visitation as they are more trusted, and the engagement ratio is higher. As a result, the local SMIs can efficiently and effectively improve the brand image of the destination, instilling a sense of pride and recognition in the local community.

Collaboration between stakeholders is essential for any industry or enterprise to excel in the long term. However, it is necessary to note that including the local community is

crucial and the heart and soul of the destination brand. They resonate with the destination's brand identity, making them feel valued and integral to the process. Therefore, the involvement of the local people through all processes of branding the destination grants longevity to the brand, reinforcing their importance and contribution.

Moreover, the role of SMIs can vary in destination branding. Our study's findings encompass the role of 'moderators,' as they usually acted as a medium for the local people to promote their place through their traditional culture and unique narratives of their ways of life that had remained uncharted for years. 'Moderators' in this context refer to SMIs who facilitate sharing local stories and experiences, often by visiting and interacting with local communities. However, finding a good match between the SMI's brand and values that complement the destination brand is essential.

5.4 Future Research

Our study focused on qualitative methods; only interviewees with few SMIs were interviewed. An alternative mixed method can be applied, and the sample size of the interviewees could be increased to reach more concise conclusions. The interviewee samples were homogeneous, but the findings with heterogeneous subjects from various regions will be an exciting alternative for similar studies to gain a deeper understanding of the topic.

Similarly, a study on the cooperation of the SMIs with the local influencers to brand the place could be studied. Further, the collaborative effort of all stakeholders in branding a region in Nepal may be researched to contest whether similar findings prevail.

5.5 Limitations

This study interviewed homogenous SMIs, and thus, the findings may not generalize to other cultures or destination sites (Hollebeek & Rather, 2019). Therefore, future studies should test our findings in other countries or regions to confirm our findings. A mixed method with qualitative and quantitative data could have been used for the study, which would have impacted its outcomes differently.

Another limitation that needs to be noted is the sample size. Because of participant unavailability, a considerable sample size was possible, so the results obtained from a large sample size can improve and show different findings. Notably, the DMOs, the playmakers in destination management, have yet to be thoroughly considered in our research, so added insights and perspectives would have solidified our findings. Furthermore, our study relied on cross-sectional data; thus, we suggest longitudinal research for more accurate findings.

In addition, our research participants were all vloggers, and they focused primarily on vlogging to showcase various destinations in Nepal. Including other SMIs using different social media platforms could have made our study more qualitative, allowed a better understanding of our research objectives, and contributed significantly to our findings.

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Appendix



We, Bikash and Milan, students from Aalborg University are conducting this interview as part of our Master Thesis- Masters in Tourism, Aalborg. The purpose of our thesis is to study how Social Media Influencers (SMIs) are branding destinations. It also aims to investigate the scenario of social media usage in Nepal's tourism industry and the changes in the tourism industry due to social media and social media influencers. Further, the objective of the research is also to examine how the content created by SMIs influences the destination image and identity of its followers.

The information received will be confidential and used only for academic purposes. We appreciate and thank you for volunteering to be part of our study.

1. When did you begin your journey as a Vlogger/Influencer?
2. What motivated you to start your journey and why?
3. Have you collaborated with other stakeholders in tourism promotion? How?
4. Do you have control over the produced content?
5. What kind of strategies (Content) do you implement to promote and brand destination?
6. What are your main goals regarding branding destination?
7. How important is destination identity and image while creating contents? Why?
8. Who is your target group? And why is this group important?
9. What kind of objectives do you have for the Social Media campaigns (Contents)?
10. How do you measure the success of your contents (Key Performance Indicators-KPIs)?

11. Could you describe one or few successful tourism campaigns that you have executed?
12. Have you faced any challenges with your tourism campaigns? How did you overcome it?
13. How do you choose a destination for your contents? Do you research for information about the destination before visits and where?
14. What kind of an image you aim to communicate of the destination to your target group?
15. What factors or characteristics of destination should be addressed to highlight the distinctiveness of the destination?
16. What kind of elements, characteristics or themes of the destination do you usually communicate to your target audience?
17. To what extent does your followers focus on attractions, activities and the general atmosphere?
18. How has the content created by you is strengthening the branding of the destination?
19. Has your content been successful in influencing the local community to set an alternative narrative of the destination? Can you describe it?